

# Mina de Malfois: Volume Three

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Memoirs by Mina de Malfois.

Dedicated to the Clives, the Harkers, and to all of Mina's friends and supporters, especially to those sharing a raft with her at Dreamwidth.

### 3.1 Mina de Malfois and the Problem Images

‘You look a million miles away,’ she said with a gentle smile. I thought that was rather rich, coming from someone who exuded ‘distant,’ and if she’d been a contemp I’d have urged her to deal with the remote in her own eye before criticizing mine, but with Arc--Ms. Silverman--somehow one just doesn’t. I’d love to be able to joke with her, but I somehow can’t. ‘Are you worrying about the ‘art exhibit’?’ she continued, inverted commas dropping audibly and daintily into place. I nodded an admission that I was. ‘Still seeking the bubble? I’d advise you not to,’ she said calmly. ‘If you’re damned to everlasting fame, you might as well make up your mind to enjoy it.’ She was gone before I could respond, her heels clicking crisply yet oddly quietly as she crossed the floor to her office.

But not worrying about my reputation wasn’t easy, in the face of Ciyerra’s latest creative burst.

Perhaps I’d better back up a bit. The new scholastic year had gotten off to a reasonably good start. The single room in Cersei House I’d been issued as a direct result of my important new job was less a perk than a godsend, removing me as it did from Jen’s immediate reach--although, oddly enough, I’d been waking on a damned near nightly basis from tangled dreams, and many of them included my former roommate.

Online, though, events were eventing. I’d returned from Wands Across to find that Ciyerra was MIA from Malfois Manor. She was, Liz informed me worriedly, in something of a snit over the Wands Across auction. I gloated briefly over that news, but it was fleeting and futile gloating, because Ciyerra, damn the wench, proved predictably incapable of discreet jealousy. Barely any time at all elapsed before word trickled through the fanosphere that the talented dollfie artist was staging an art show, having simultaneously booked space in a virtual gallery and on the walls of some sordid little community college. Luckily the school--which, I might add, I politely refrained from mocking publicly, however much the certainty that it was her Alma mater privately amused me--

was far enough out of state that I had every excuse not to be in attendance, but there was no excuse that could possibly cover off my not putting in a virtual appearance, so I gamely tagged along with Liz.

Taking a page from my book, Ciyerra wasn't in evidence at her own exhibit, which instantly made me wonder if she was present but incognito. She'd roped Mrs. Sev and Darla into hostessing, and it was gratifying, I confess, that they both immediately abandoned the other guests on seeing me and crossed the floor to gush over my presence there. I naturally assumed this was due to my inherent BNFness, but as it turned out, there was a less pleasant but more proximate cause.

Ciyerra might not have the talent her deluded fans credit her with, but I can't deny she has some sort of creative power, and being miffed at me seemed to bring it well to the fore. Mingled with my shock and horror and unspeakable embarrassment when I saw her latest dollfie works, I mean to say, I also felt a distinct flicker of what might almost, were I feeling it about anybody sane, be characterized as admiration. She'd invented, or possibly stolen from somewhere, an entirely new genre of art. She'd branched out into dollfie RPF, or maybe RPP: real person portraiture.

Unfortunately, she'd taken as her subjects PrinceC and myself. Even had I not recognized the clothes her dollfies wore, the captions would have adequately driven home Ciyerra's point, and what a bizarre, catty, vindictive little point it was.

I was staring, my avatar frozen in place, my realworld self turning steadily crimson with mortification, at a wall arrayed with photographs of posed BJDs, all dressed and arranged and labelled to make it utterly, undeniably clear that she'd intended to depict our arranged-by-auction embrace at the con.

Only--and there is not enough cringe in the world to cover off how I felt about this--she'd gone above and beyond, or rather below and beneath, because as one progressed along the wall one approached a sort of zenith of

shockingness. The photos got less and less safe for work, and less and less, I might add, accurate. It was bad enough to be rendered speechless with squick at a collection of portraits of dollfies embracing passionately in front of a crowd of little witnesses. It was worse to read some of the captions: 'PrinceC purchases Mina de Malfois' affections at Wands Across,' the first one said, and the point was reiterated many times beneath the deeply ludicrous art.

But it was somehow still worse again to realize that they weren't even factual, and that they attested to a level of intimacy we'd never--well, I'd never--dreamed of. He'd certainly never put his hand there, and I'd never, well, reciprocated. We'd have been arrested. Fans might rather let loose at cons, but they don't, I'm relatively sure, tolerate public displays of quite that nature. And the photos went on from there, hard though it was to fathom, extending into even more purely imaginary depictions of us in a hotel room, and to admittedly less fictitious scenes of the two of us with Lord Henri Antoine Silvestre de Gravina. On sight of those I wondered briefly if PrinceC had betrayed my confidence, but dismissed the thought as unworthy. The boy had been raised on the maxim that 'what happens at the con stays at the con,' so doubtless what happened in virtual encounters was equally sacrosanct in his eyes. Still, the shots of his dollfie avatar being led merrily down the rimrose path by the dissolute Lord de Gravina were shockingly...remniscent.

Mrs.Sev and Darla and Liz had discreetly melted away, though with many a backward glance to make sure I hadn't actually died of shame. I appreciated their concerned looks, but I was beyond immediate help. I tried to pull myself together and take what comfort I could from the slender and, so far as these things went, attractive ball-jointed doll Ciyerra had used to represent me, but instead of feeling better I began to feel slightly jealous of the damnable thing. It wasn't terribly consoling that she was flatteringly slender, at least not in the face of my present indignation.

A masculine hand on my virtual forearm made me jump. 'Miss Mina,' Warr1or said, looking disturbing solemn.

'Warr1or,' I said calmly, even as I blushed from head to toe again. 'How's the het archive coming along?'

'It's going as well as it can, considering that I have stalkers and enemies on every side,' he assured me, and then said much too fervently, 'but that hardly matters in the face of your distress.'

Yes. Well, I wasn't too chuffed at being a dollfie porn star, it's true, but that hardly seemed adequate cause for overheating Warr1or and introducing that familiarly fanatical tone into his persona, so I tried to look unconcerned. I opened my mouth to claim that Ciyerra's art wasn't that bad really, but he was already in full flight.

'I tried my best to save you,' he was saying, all valiant and crazy. 'But PrinceC kept outbidding me. I'm truly sorry, Miss Mina. It must have been so shocking and upsetting to you, having to kiss two different men within a week. If there's anything, anything, I can do to relieve your anguish...,' he left off, too choked with emotion to continue. I hadn't the heart to point out he was increasing my discomfort considerably, though by now even my avatar was cringing. His avatar's eyes shone, possibly just with his standard lunacy but I think with tears, which implied ominous things indeed. I considered comforting him by reassuring him that the experience hadn't upset me in the least, but decided firmly against this. It was surely safer to have Warr1or weeping over my sullied virtue and nonexistent sensibilities than to have him denouncing me as the con bicycle.

'I blame PrinceC,' Warr1or said abruptly. I shut my eyes in momentary thankfulness. 'He goes too far.' Warr1or frowned, looking conflicted. 'It's probably the negative influence of his friends. That congoing crowd can't be trusted.' I'd thought much the same thing myself, once upon a time, but I'd had to revise that a bit now that I'd begun to be counted as one of them. And come to

that, wasn't Warr1or part of the 'congoing crowd'? A much bigger part of it than I was, technically, since I'd seen concrete photographic evidence he'd been to lots of the things. There seemed no safe way of saying so, though; Warr1or's a dear, and he certainly has his unexpected moments of appeal, but he's not, let's face it, even a little bit stable, and I wasn't feeling up to dealing with yet another display of his temper.

More and more people were pouring in, twittering and squeeing over Ciyerra's latest travesties, and even buying the things. I excused myself and went in search of Liz, only to meet her coming in search of self. We both agreed my presence was probably overheating the enkindled, and left immediately. But the exhibit stayed popular for days and days, and it was mildly nauseating to contemplate. Who knew what those pictures were inspiring. And it was at this stage that Arc found me sunk in gloom and reshelving, and offered her singularly impossible-to-follow advice that I not worry about my reputation. How could I? Already I was being accused in some quarters of damaging the reputation of the entire Sanguinity fandom, not to mention scaring off future players, by behaving so wantonly. Funnily enough, no one had called PrinceC on his behaviour.

An even worse trend loomed on the horizon. A handful of fandom's deep thinkers had taken it into their heads to post extensively on the subject of what it meant that dollfie-Mina was incredibly thin while, they added with wholly unnecessary accuracy, anyone who'd seen me at the con knew I wasn't particularly. By some small mercy no photos of me surfaced to illustrate these arguments; those seemed as satisfyingly nonexistent as though some supernatural force had erased them from the internet and banned cameras from the con. But still. That was my body they were pawing over in their well-meant politicization of the issues, and I didn't much appreciate it. I don't care how much they were claiming to be supporting me; I wanted them to shut up about how much healthier and more realistic I was. In my bleaker moments I began to

wonder if I were developing dollforexia myself.

My very own fangirls were saying deeply discouraging things about my personal appearance, too. They seized on the whole 'plump Mina' thing with an unholy glee. I know my body doesn't have quite the same diamond-hard and diamond-clear perfection as my mind, or for that matter as my fanfiction, but I hardly think I deserved to become the locus of a tiresome flab fetish. Fic was being produced--disrespectful fic. It dwelt lovingly on bulges I didn't even have, damn it.

I was sitting in my room one night, trying to distract myself with porn from a creeping urge to measure my own thighs, when my second-floor window slid smoothly open. It was Jen, wearing a lot of khaki and a camera on a strap.

'Ami Jenever, Girl Reporter,' I sneered, trying to look and sound as though people climbed in through my bedroom window every night.

'I thought,' Jen said with an unsettling grin, 'you might want to pose for a few photos.'

'Pardon?' I asked, aghast.

'To resolve your body-image problems,' she said coolly and heartlessly. 'I excel at stills, you know--I've learned from the very best. I thought we'd fling a few devastatingly gorgeous shots of you online, and let the evidence speak for itself.' She saw I was hesitating, and added soothingly, 'You'll have right of refusal on every picture, I promise, and I'll destroy the negatives of any you don't like. Seriously, Cara Mina, I'm good at this. Let it be my gift to you.'

Perhaps, I reflected, Arc had been right. She usually was. Perhaps I should spend less time worrying about my reputation. Except...she had encouraged me to enjoy my notoriety, hadn't she? And I'd never had a picture taken of myself that I really liked. It was tempting to see if Jen's image-management skills actually did extend to film. And it would mean I wouldn't have to post a word in response to the chubfic; there'd be hard evidence of just how fictitious the fics were, so I could stay mum, right? Which when you



thought about it amounted to the same thing as worrying less about my reputation, or at least posting less in defence of it.

Jen was smiling in a way that suggested she was reading my dithering all too accurately as agreement. 'Yes?' she prompted, still poised there on the window ledge.

'Perhaps,' I said.

### 3.2 Mina de Malfois and the Staged Thrust (part one)

Something dead disturbing had popped up in-game. Well, I say dead disturbing, but as in actuality the questionable behaviour was being enacted by the powers that be, utilizing NPCs who were all either Vampiric or Angelic, technically I suppose the dead weren't so much disturbed as willing and complicit.

But everyone else was disturbed: variously aghast, pleased, titillated, indignant, empowered, or in my case confused. I didn't know, offhand, what I thought. I'd need a consult before I made up my mind. I mean, people had naturally been asking what I thought, but I was maintaining an aloof distance while assuring them I was giving careful consideration to the deeper implications of Sanguinity's Vamps and Seraphs tonguing and mounting each other in displays that were either culturally-condoned mock transgression or else important and meaningful gestures towards something-or-other. I wanted, I assured everyone in a cautiously worded post, space for independent thought so I could reach my own conclusions.

'Arc,' I messaged her as soon as I had an idle moment, 'do you feel oppressed by comfort-licking?'

There was a longish and, I fancied, contemplative pause, or possibly just a puzzled one. It can be so difficult to read aporias, or aporii, or whatever they are. And I didn't, I realized belatedly, have any idea how much if any of the supernatural performative in-game sexuality Arc had been exposed to.

'We're putting on coffee here at the archive,' she responded finally, shocking me to the core with her blatant acceptance of beverages nearish the documents. 'Why don't you join us?'

I got there seconds later, and Arc was gone. 'She's stepped out in search of real cream,' Xena explained, looking thoroughly amused by my dismay. 'I'm

here to keep the coffee drinkers well clear of the stacks.’ She grinned wolfishly at the nervous huddle of assistants, who were pressing themselves more or less into the wall nearest the percolator in their eagerness to display non-spilliness. I was beginning to be able to differentiate some of them now (Melissa was the one whose t-shirts bore a username I was almost sure I recognized from somewhere, for instance, and Moselle Greenberg was the one who dressed almost as retro-ly as Arc), but their universal Xena terror had temporarily eclipsed their individuality, such as it was.

Seldom had come in right behind me, and his low appreciative whistle expressed at least half my reaction to the sight of Xena’s bare back as she whipped off her jacket and slung it over a chair. The other half of my reaction was a degree of aghastness no sound could convey: her very-nearly-backless halter top revealed, or quite possibly displayed, two sets of long, vivid scratches. I shut my eyes for a minute, willing myself not to have seen that.

Seldom, damn his eyes, wasn’t helping. ‘Did Adage scratch you?’ he asked, his every word dripping with false innocence.

Xena smiled a disconcertingly informative smile. ‘Adage?’ she said. ‘No.’ I could cheerfully have choked Seldom for giving her that opening.

And I wasn’t, apparently, the only one. One of the senior assistants, Mary Santecristo--usually addressed as ‘Dark Mistress’ by the others, for reasons I hadn’t entirely fathomed yet--glowered at him. ‘Why are you even here?’ she asked peevishly. ‘The St. Scholastica campus is meant to be a safe female space; why’ve we got you working here? It’s intrusive.’

‘You know as well as I do that St. Benedict’s has a reciprocal agreement with St. Schol’s,’ Seldom purred, and looked to me for confirmation. He faltered slightly when he saw I was giving him my most withering of looks, and went on in a far more conciliatory tone, ‘Anyway, I came in especially to share some fannish gossip.’

‘Is this about performative queerness?’ I asked, unable to resist upper-handing.

He gave me a pretty damned queer look in return. ‘I hadn’t thought so,’ he admitted, ‘but that might make sense, yes. It’s about the Princely Plots fanfiction archive--do you know it?’

I warily admitted I did.

‘Well,’ Seldom said gleefully, ‘the owner’s just thrown a major public tantrum, and booted his chief moderator off the editorial board.’ That boded ill, for me particularly: if Seldom was aware, however tangentially, of Warr1or, then Seldom was one alarmingly short step from bumping up against my own online self. The horrendous possibility that he already knew perfectly well who I was presented itself in all its stomach-dropping nerve-jangling glory.

And, hold on: wasn’t PrinceC Warr1or’s chief mod? Worlds threatened to collide; mere anarchy was etcetera’d; I suddenly knew exactly what This Was All About, or thought I did. If Warr1or was pitching a fit in PrinceC’s direction, then I’d be willing to bet cash I didn’t have that this was about either That Kiss or Those Dollfie Pictures. This was Very Bad Indeed. It was indicative of my pronounced mental strain that I’d suddenly broken out in capitalization. It would never do, though, to reveal my rising stress levels to Seldom, whom I sensed would be rendered only more interested if he scented the connection between his fannish gossip and his real-world acquaintance.

‘I can’t say I’ve been following it,’ I said coolly, but found myself unable to resist adding, ‘Any idea what the spat was about?’

‘The archive owner accused the moderator of supporting immoral behaviour through his choice of friends,’ Seldom said, sounding gleeful. ‘I’ve been hoping for significant developments ever since I first heard there was going to be a male-run archive. I may be able to get a substantial footnote out of this, if the ‘immoral behaviour’ turns out to have been linked to gender roles or identity...’ He slipped into thesis-dronage, and I tuned him out accordingly, limp

with relief and absorbed in my own thoughts. I couldn't possibly be that lucky, could I? I mean, if Seldom was right and Warr1or was merely upset over the latest perceived immorality, this probably had nothing to do with me at all. It could be something perfectly ordinary setting him off, like noticing PrinceC had furies on his friendslist, in which case I could stop worrying and maybe even empathize a bit. After all, far be it from me to dissuade potential furies from following their incomprehensible bliss, but I did wonder sometimes if they leapt right in at the anthropomorphic cat level, or if they tried assuaging their no-doubt-okay kink with intermediate steps first. Buy a teddy bear, possibly, or try dating Italian men. I don't want to be intolerant, but if Warr1or balked at discussion of yiffing, I felt for him.

'Nancy,' said a cool voice from the doorway, and my heart skipped a beat. Arc didn't sound angry, or reproachful, or anything but calm, really, and yet Xena picked up her jacket and slung it back over her shoulders. Everyone else evinced a sudden all-consuming interest in their own shoes, their fingernails, or the ceiling.

'Mina,' Arc went on, just as calmly, 'you wanted to talk to me about something?' I nodded mutely. 'Step into my office, then,' she said kindly.

'May I?' Xena asked as we passed her. Arc glanced at me, and I blushed and nodded, pleased and astonished to have been consulted. And really, Xena's input would be valuable here, provided I didn't actually die of embarrassment whilst trying to solicit it.

'So what's up?' Arc asked cheerfully, once she'd shut her door.

'I don't know if you've been to Sanguinity Online lately,' I began, and they both shook their heads. 'There's been a lot of...uh...sexual activity from the angel and vampire NPCs. In public, I mean. Same-sex sexual activity. They've been licking and humping each other, and greeting each other with sort of tongue-intensive kisses, and, well, groping.' I glanced up from my feet to see how they were taking this.

Xena looked thoroughly entertained. 'O battered vegetables! o eels!' she said, which I'm sure meant something, but I'd be pressed to say what.

Arc still looked as if she were taking me at least moderately seriously. 'Is that a problem?' she asked gently.

'I don't know,' I confessed. There was no way I was going to discuss my private visceral reactions to the S.O. exhibitions, so I rushed straight on to meta matters. 'There's a lot of debate over whether this is progressive. I mean, what does it mean? Are the NPCs challenging gender roles and expanding tolerance, or are they fetishizing and trivializing other people's sexuality, or what?

'And you expected me to know what their motivations were?' Arc asked. She sounded slightly amused herself, now, but she was also watching me very closely, in a way that made me wonder if there was some reason why she'd have access to that information.

'No,' I said, which had been the absolute truth until a second ago. 'I just wanted to ask: does staged homoeroticism oppress you at all?'

### 3.2 Mina de Malfois and the Staged Thrust (part two)

I snuck glances to see how Arc and Xena were reacting. They appeared to be carefully avoiding looking at one another, while also trying not to stare at me. This was getting damned awkward. For one thing, we were running out of directions to gaze in.

‘I’m not sure I follow you,’ Arc said after a moment, her voice flat with a kind of careful calm.

‘Me, either,’ said Xena merrily. ‘What exactly have you been witnessing, Mina? Perhaps you could demonstrate.’

‘Nancy,’ snapped Arc, and Xena fell to silent smirking.

‘How,’ Arc went on quietly, ‘would it oppress us, exactly? It’s not as if licking is rationed, after all.’

‘Yes, but,’ I struggled to express what I’d seen better expressed elsewhere, ‘the angel and vampire avatars get to play at homosexual behaviour without having to carry the burden of being labelled gay in a heterosexist world.’

There was a blankish pause. ‘They’re characters in a game,’ Arc said after a bit. ‘Playing is what they do.’

‘But it’s a display devoid of repercussions,’ I argued, having triumphantly seized a direct quote from the jumble of meta sloshing around in my brain. ‘It’s just a performance.’

‘They’re pixels on a screen,’ Arc said, now sounding distinctly amused. ‘“Display” is all they can do. And unless you have direct access to the innermost souls of the players behind the performance, I don’t think you can say it’s ‘just’ anything.’

“But men must know, that in this theatre of man’s life it is reserved only for God and angels to be lookers on,” Xena agreed. ‘Or not even angels, in this case.’

‘Or vampires?’ I said, feeling more lost than ever, and I must have looked it, because Arc kindly footnoted the conversation.

‘The point is, Mina, that any performance is to some degree a lie, but it still might be holding a mirror up to nature in a larger sense. I wouldn’t worry, if I were you, about whether a generally positive portrayal of affectionate sexuality is an exactly-accurate reflection of the performer’s private life.’

I looked at Xena--Nancy--and she nodded. ‘It’s very Elizabethan of you to worry,’ she said, still sounding slightly choked with laughter. ‘Or possibly Platonic. But really: I’m cool with the tonguing and humpage.’

I thanked them and backed quietly out of the office, shutting the door behind me, or technically in front of me since I was facing it. I still felt faintly unsatisfied. I mean, I respected and appreciated their thoughts, but for some reason I couldn’t quite pin down the whole subject left me feeling disturbed and unsettled.

Out in the archive life was imitating art again, with one or two subtle displays of affection from which I averted my possibly-oversensitized eyes--I mean, maybe all library staff plait each other’s hair, who knows; I might be reading meaning into random gestures now. That can happen, if you think about things for too long at a time.

And Seldom had his laptop open, and was beckoning me over. ‘This is a statement from the Princely Plots’ owner,’ he said, and sure enough, there it was: Warr1or’s journal, ‘Ironclad.’

Over time I’ve come to admire Warr1or’s willingness to state his opinions boldly and without flock or screened comments. His insistence on carrying out conversations where anyone can read them is admirable, in its own way, don’t you think? But I admire from a distance: I’ve no intention of arguing with him in the full glare of public attention. I saw at a glance that this was another of those instances where any support or opinion I offered would best be



offered discreetly, quite possibly via email. To do otherwise would be to risk forever linking us in the public mind, such as it was, of fandom.

I read a few paragraphs over Seldom's shoulder, cringing internally, and then did my best to look bored, but I don't think Seldom was entirely fooled. For one thing, he offered to let me know of any further developments, which he'd hardly have done unless he thought I was interested. Then again: grad student. He might just have been seized by one of those untreatable compulsive urges to tell someone about his research.

I hung around long enough to have a coffee with Monica, deep in romantic agonies over some guy named Viggo, and Ceswyn, who was once again on the brink of flunking out, dropping out, or staging a sit-in to express her displeasure with the entire school of Library Studies. People's real lives are so complicated. It was sort of a relief to head back to the safety of my computer to deal with Warr1or.

Well, a relief until I was actually sitting there pondering his communiqué, anyway. It was less and less reliefy the more I absorbed it. 'I've been thinking about this for a while now,' his post began, 'and I've had to reach the unavoidable conclusion that one's shipping preferences reflect on one's real life moral standing. And clearly anyone who calls a Resonant a "semi-literate thug" or accuses them of cowardice, while secretly shipping Pierce and Jab, might be capable of the grossest misreadings and vices.'

Thinking about it 'for a while' was an understatement; it had been well over a year since he'd had that conversation with PrinceC. The thought of Warr1or brooding all that time rather gave one pause.

'As you probably all know,' he continued, 'the creators of Sanguinity have made it clear that they despise the moral purity admired by their Resonant fans. Their scorn for our values is obvious. Why else would they have altered their own canon, rejecting their own earlier and better symbolism to allow the debased displays of lust and perversion we have lately witnessed in-game? Their

hatred of Resonance is both obvious and puzzling, but one thing is clear: truly talented creators would never have trivialized romance in this way.'

'Added to the profound disappointment we all feel at how Sanguinity canon has turned out, I have a more bitter personal betrayal to endure. I had thought PrinceC was a decent, moral person. It seems I was wrong: in several discussions I have seen him defending the unspeakably vulgar displays condoned by the S.O. creators, and what is worse, joking about Resonance and our stated disapproval of canon. I should have paid greater heed to my initial reservations about him. To protect the sanctity of the archive, I have removed PrinceC from his position as a moderator of Princely Plots. I don't entirely blame him for his failings and shortcomings; I suspect his friends are at least partly to blame for leading him astray. Lately he's been much in the company of a group of "historically-minded" Aesthetes, whose shallow grasp of history and willing embrace of the most disturbing perversities can only have had a negative effect on him.'

I sighed heavily, and wondered how to proceed. Obviously I couldn't be too supportive of Warr1or, since I didn't actually agree with any of this and knew full well that whatever PrinceC had been doing, it was bound to be saner than devout resonance. At the same time, though, I suspected that Warr1or was really upset; I could sense the hurt feelings behind the crazed anger. And he had been kind to me--they both had. Bugger.

I left a cautious comment. 'Warr1or,' I typed gently, 'I'm sorry you're upset, but I'm sure PrinceC didn't mean any harm. After all, I've written femmeslash myself, remember?'

'That's entirely different,' he snapped back instantly; obviously he was online. 'Femmeslash has a sweet purity and innocence about it, and is based on underlying tender friendship, not lust. It isn't like slash at all.'

I rolled my eyes in annoyance. It took concentrated effort to keep from replying with a sarcastic question as to whether this meant he approved of the

staged homoerotic excesses of the female angels and vampires. I decided to step away from the computer before I said anything I'd regret, and I stayed away until the next day, hoping things might magically sort themselves out in my absence.

The next morning my inbox was, naturally, full, but there were only two really important items. The first was from Jen, and contained several of the photos she'd taken of me--and these were, I saw with a slight thrill of pleased gratitude, quite attractive--along with some she'd altered. She'd displayed a disconcerting degree of skill in photoshopping herself onto the bed next to me, arms variously wrapped around me or tangled in my hair. She looked friendlier and more feminine than I'd ever before seen her. In the final shot she was actually licking my neck. 'Not to worry,' her message said. 'I wouldn't dream of posting those last shots--unless you say I can, Cara Mina.'

I decided it was the better part of valour not to answer her immediately; I needed time to regain the requisite coolth before attempting a reply. So I continued clicking through my inbox, and soon fetched up against the next significant item, which was a notification that Ciyerra had updated her livejournal. So of course I went to read the entry--there's no point in putting someone under quite justified observation if you don't make a minimal effort, after all--and a bloody good thing I did, too. She'd weighed in on S.O.'s performative sexuality, only instead of clearly stating her own position, she'd coyly sidestepped and spent the entire post sneering at mine. I hadn't even voiced an opinion yet! But there was Ciyerra, attributing reactionary views to me, and announcing to the world that anyone could deduce from my continued association with Warr1or that I was hysterically heteronormative and probably wildly anti- staged homoeroticism.

Well. Obviously I was going to have to act decisively and with dignity. I stormed back to my email account to answer Jen's message. 'Darling,' I told her, 'you have my full and complete permission to post those photos, unflocked, and

I'd frankly prefer you didn't waste time explaining any of them have been altered.' And I hit send. Defiantly.

### 3.3 Mina de Malfois and the Christmas Present

'Twas the night before Christmas break, and I was stuck in an airport. The winds howled and shrieked and flung snow at the windows; the tarmac was rendered completely invisible as well as, obviously, impassible; and I alternately longed for a fireplace, and contemplated hanging myself with one of my own stockings. The airport's emergency power source wasn't, evidently, terribly powerful, so only randomly chosen pieces of equipment were functioning, and distressingly few of these were of the lighty-heaty type. I hadn't even been sure I wanted to go home for the holidays, and now this. And to add to my misery, for some idiotic reason I'd decided to dress up, so I was shivering in an attractive but impractical skirt and blouse.

At least I'd made one wise choice. Knowing I'd be in transit and then in fandom-hostile territory, I'd decided not to sign up for any fic exchanges this year. While this meant I'd be foregoing the pleasure of just possibly finding that someone had produced something absolutely perfect especially for me, it also meant I'd be spared the equally likely possibility of exerting myself to find things to praise about some well-meant fright of twisted perversity and bent grammar. Even more blessedly still, I'd been spared the struggle to produce a timely offering of my own, written to some stranger's incomprehensible specs. Don't get me wrong: I adore fic exchanges. But let's face it, they're strewn with more stressors and squicks than one needs to face every year at exam time, right? And I could always, I'd thought guiltily, pinch-hit or maybe assist with last minute beta-ing, or steal time to produce an after-the-fact fic to satisfy someone's unmet desires.

The mini-blanket the airline staff had handed me was as utterly unwarming as their comfortless smiles; they'd chilled me to the core when they'd informed me my baggage had been checked through and couldn't be retrieved. I

was beginning to wonder if they were some sort of demons that fed off human suffering, or if they were conducting experiments in cryogirls, or reducing us all to fishsticks to provision local school cafeterias. Oh, great, I was hallucinating.

Jen or Josh plopped down next to me. Joshen. I giggled. 'I wouldn't have expected you to be in my hallucination,' I said. She gave me an extremely concerned look.

'Stay here,' she said, which was what people had been saying to me all bloody day. She vanished, and I was left to slump and wonder idly whether I'd forgotten painting my fingernails blue this morning, or if my hands were turning into something grim by Jack London. Time passed, I suppose, but it's difficult to tell in airports.

'Put these on,' said a voice, and handed me a stack of new clothes. I peered past the fleecy bathrobe and pyjamas.

'Joshen!' I said happily, and my former roommate sighed heavily and knelt down in front of me.

'How long has it been since you've eaten?' she asked crossly, beginning to unbutton my blouse.

I sat up, alarmed. 'We are in the center of an airport,' I said, restored to alert dignity by this intrusion.

'We're in the center of a dark airport inhabited by semi-frozen zombies,' she argued back, but at least she removed her hands from my clothes. 'The washroom's over there; go change, and you'll feel less miserable. I'm going to find us some food.'

'There isn't any food,' I said, but went to change anyway.

I emerged dreamily a few minutes later, entirely and utterly snug from bathrobe hood to slippers and at every point between, and with my dressy clothes shoved into my carry-on bag, there to wrinkle irretrievably and lose that whole semblance of 'attractive independent adult daughter' I'd been trying to muster. Who had I been kidding, anyway? No one in my family was terribly

likely to notice, much less to be impressed or pleased, that I'd dressed up for them. For a moment the pleasantly surreal feeling of wearing warm nightclothes in a cold airport threatened to dissolve in a puddle of maudlin self-evaluation.

'Here,' said Josh firmly, thrusting a styrofoam cup of cocoa into my hand. 'You'll feel better when you've had this.' I sipped it and, oddly, did begin to feel better, almost instantly. \* Now that I wasn't privately reenacting the Franklin Expedition and had energy for observation and clear-headed thought, I'd made up my mind that this was the Josh mode, not the Jen feature. His hair had grown out to nearly shoulder-length dark curls, gleaming with honey-golden highlights. The brown leather aviator's jacket with the golden wings pin looked damned dashing, and those were very attractive boots. And thighs. And shoulders.

'What's in this cocoa?' I asked suspiciously.

'Ask not what's in the cocoa; ask what's in your own heart,' he non-answered. 'Drink up, and we'll head over to the elite lounge. I have a distinct feeling they're going to be able to produce hot dinners for the two of us.'

'Only frequent-flyer business-class type people have passes to the elite lounge,' I pointed out. 'And I don't think they'd let me in dressed like this. And in case you haven't noticed, the airport's running on back-up generators powered by hamsters or something, and nobody's selling any food.'

'Are you always this pessimistic?' Josh asked, and pulled two elite passes from his pocket. They had, I saw, our names on them--or to be strictly accurate, one of them had my name on it, and the other said 'Josh Amos.' He grinned and tucked the Mina one into my bathrobe pocket.

'That doesn't make any sense at all,' I objected. 'How could you possibly...?'

'I have a lot of influence in airports,' he said, shrugging. 'You might say they're a specialty of mine.' And he must have been telling the truth or some portion thereof, because they waved us into the 'Black Swan,' as the elite lounge

was called, without so much as blinking at my clothes, and the waiter didn't even bother pretending hot meals were hard to come by. Honestly. It just goes to show that the privileged and the people really are two nations.

'What's new in your fannish life?' Josh was asking politely from behind a highball glass.

'Warr1or's asked me to write some Housefic for his archive,' I said. I frowned slightly, and confessed the difficulty this presented. 'The problem is, I'm strictly a traditionalist in that fandom. I only write House/Wilson; the het pairings don't interest me at all.'

'A problem indeed,' Josh agreed, sounding amused but sympathetic. 'Especially given that your stance on performative gayness has been so widely lauded.' He looked, as well he might, a bit smug there. 'Producing hetfic for a cloistered archive now might strike people as hypocritical.'

Bugger: I hadn't even thought of that. I suppose there was a certain danger in being too closely linked in the public mind with Warr1or's carefully guarded domain of hetness, when I'd come out so strongly in support of slashy behaviours. It might, I mean, start to look as if I were trivializing the issue and reducing people's sexuality to mere enactment. I'm not particularly Derridian myself, but I know fandom can be pretty damned touchy over signs and signifiers, especially if the fans feel they're being reduced to whichever one of those it is they don't like being reduced to.

My train of thought switched tracks when the waiter arrived, bringing us the airport version of a hot meal. Possibly it was because I'd gone all day on vending-machine fare, or maybe it was the novelty of eating Christmas dinner in the middle of the night on Christmas Eve, but it was, I enthused, one of the best meals I'd ever eaten, and Josh agreed with me. The goose was a veritable feathered phenomenon, the gravy and mashed potatoes and applesauce were perfect (if puzzlingly overabundant for just the two of us), and afterwards there was a peculiarly bland pudding which I just know must have been British. Even



the hovering waiter, who looked bone-weary and who had every reason to be thoroughly disgruntled at having pulled this shift, was a marvel of cheerful efficiency, and I planned to empty each pocket of my bag to dig out every possible fragment of tip-money.

‘One last drink?’ Josh asked afterwards, and I suggested raspberry martinis. I know one shouldn’t encourage stalkers or whatever, but he looked so delighted by the shared joke that I was glad I had.

‘Of course the question now,’ Josh said, ‘is which way you want to go.’ I waited for clarification before touching that. ‘I suppose you were on your way to spend the holidays with your family?’

Oh. ‘Yes,’ I said. I’d almost forgotten. ‘You?’

He shook his head. ‘The people who raised us don’t have a lot to do with Rabbit or me anymore,’ he said carefully. ‘So, Mina: do you want to continue in the direction you were headed, or turn around and go back?’

‘You make it sound as if you expect me to be able to do either,’ I said, ‘but I’m stuck here, in case you haven’t noticed, and so is everyone else.’

‘Imagine for a moment my influence extends to ensuring at least one flight takes off safely,’ insisted my clearly deranged former roommate. ‘Which one?’

I thought it over. Visiting my family was never easy or, well, all that pleasant. My sisters were guaranteed not to be satisfied with anything anyone gave them or did for them; I suppose they’re representative samples of consumer culture, but so am I, and I don’t remember being quite that discontented at their age. My mother has many good points, but being demonstrably pleased to see me has never been one of them. And while I was at the familial hearth I could, I knew from experience, expect a steady barrage of criticism about wasting time whenever I sat at the computer, a reliable stream of derision whenever I picked up a pen and notebook, and a lot of bracing honesty about my clothes, hair, weight, life, and prospects--if by ‘bracing’ one means ‘crippling.’

Whereas the nearly-empty campus proffered books, computers, geeks, quiet conversations, alone time, and the constant hope of friendly meetings with aloof librarians and bar-hopping pirates.

No contest, really. 'Let's go home,' I said to Josh, and he smiled.

### 3.4 Mina de Malfois and the Underlying Issue

I'd been chatting with Warr1or, which as always was an informative experience, just not necessarily informative in the direction he intended. He'd been warning me against Josh Amos again, in vague and foreboding terms--beware the ides, kind of thing--and admitted himself that he didn't know what it was, exactly, that made him so distrust Josh. 'I just don't,' he kept saying. 'I think he's someone whose influence will corrupt and tarnish you, Mina. And our fandom has had enough degeneration.'

I knew, but carefully refrained from mentioning, that that was an oblique reference to PrinceC. 'Like PrinceC. He just has it so easy,' Warr1or burst out, thereby proving how ineffective carefully refraining can be. 'He follows idiotic fads, and no one calls him on his affectations. He's had every privilege, but ordinary hard-pressed fans embrace him. And he indulges in flirtations with real-life yaoi--and yet he could afford to buy that kiss, and I couldn't stop him.' He broke off.

'It was hardly unpleasant,' I pointed out logically. 'For me, I mean. I didn't actually require rescuing.'

'I know,' Warr1or said. 'I wouldn't have minded so much if it had been your Archivist--I know you adore her, and that kind of admiration is an entirely different thing. And she'd have had sense enough to know where to draw the line. She's got dark hair, too, that's reassuring--it's not like she's some shallow, popular redhead. But that cad, that fool of a boy...and he's a Booter, Mina, have you forgotten that? You have too much of that sort of influence in your life already, if you ask me.'

I hadn't asked him, but he swept on irregardless. 'What you need,' he wrote pompously, 'is a steadying, balancing influence in your life.'

Luckily I had email from Arc just at that juncture, so I was able to excuse myself and escape the confines of IM. I'd noticed earlier I'd had a puzzling influx of some hundred-odd emails, but hadn't gotten around to opening any of them to inquire further into the oddity. I went straight to hers now.

'Mina,' her message ran, 'I appreciate your taking my opinions so very much to heart, but you've quite overexcited poor Seldom. Just a head's up: he's wandering the campus, looking for you. He claims you're uniquely placed to help him with his thesis.'

My heart sank. I wasn't sure exactly what the first part of that meant, but the latter definitely suggested Seldom had twigged to my being Someone in fandom. Perhaps he'd seen me with Jen at some point, and recognized her as Razzberry Martini; heaven knows that would uniquely position me to help, not just with his thesis, but with any number of monographs on abnormal psychology. Had there been any photographic evidence of Razz, though? I couldn't remember any.

And then I went through my inbox, and learned that if there hadn't been before, there certainly was now.

You know, my instructions to Jen had been perfectly clear, or at least clearish: post these pictures, and don't mention photoshopping. How hard is that? I'd never guessed--no reasonable person could have guessed--that I'd needed to add, 'Oh, by the way, post them as Ami Jenever, please.' So I was a tad gobsmacked, and temporarily unable to summon my innate British ability to keep a stiff upper lip, to find that she was staging the triumphal return of Razz Martini, and using me to do it. That is, she had created a shiny new journal and posted, as many gleeful LNFs had chosen fit to inform me, a few highly performative photographs featuring the two of us. Looking at those photos in this scary new context, I couldn't help but see that we looked like extremely close friends indeed. No wonder poor Seldom was overheated, and him an innocent grad student who probably didn't get out much.

I felt uncomfortably exposed to fandom's gaze. It would take something pretty serious to distract them from this. Luckily for me, I had just the thing. A racism debate had been brewing in a fandom I was tangentially involved with. I'd been steering clear of the discussion, but perhaps I should weigh in on that now, thereby signaling that my absorption in lofty, important issues precluded my wasting time and attention on mere personal gossip. Yes: that would do nicely.

This did demand consultation, though. Naturally I wanted to weigh in on the right side, and I was almost certain I knew which one that was, but in my casual reading of the situation I'd noticed that the other side had arguments that interested me as well, for personal reasons. What balance should I strike between righteous indignation and my sneaking sympathy for the fans who felt the blonde characters were also undervalued? I'd better, I decided, do the sensible thing and ask Arc what she thought. Surely she'd know what was the correct position to take.

I know what you're going to say: you're going to dismiss my hesitation to weigh in decisively as mere fear of being dogpiled. That's not bloody fair, you know. It seriously underestimates fandom when wrongheaded people argue that we're swayed and bullied into conformity. I happen to believe that fandom, for the most part, weighs the soundness of arguments and, no less crucially, the elegance of their expression and the reputations of the people making the arguments, and on that basis judges individual fans' positions on the issues of the day.

And after all, people do make blonde jokes, and I can personally assure you there's a depth and seriousness to the hurtfulness of that which shouldn't be underestimated. But then, I do frequently want to nailbat Gwen Stefani right in the face, so maybe bloneness is trumped by other considerations.

When I got to Arc's office--breezing through the archive with the brisk efficiency of someone on a mission, and collecting a gratifying number of envious and curious looks from my fellow research assistants--Xena was there, opening her mail. 'My uncle's sent me another set of Rosary beads,' she said, holding up something pink and pretty for inspection. I reached for them admiringly, and then stopped just short of actually touching.

'Oh. Do you mind my handling them?' I asked, scrupulously polite.

Xena gave me an odd look. 'No, why would I?' she asked.

I shrugged. 'I thought possibly they were for Catholic hands only,' I explained.

Xena snorted. 'If that were true, I'd have burst into flames myself by now,' she said. 'I'm not exactly up to code myself, you know. I can't remember the last time I made confession.' She looked privately amused and added, 'Well, not to a priest anyway.' And then she carefully amended that further, to, 'Well. Not in a confessional.'

'Nancy,' said Arc, wincing slightly and holding up one hand. 'Just stop there, please.' Xena obligingly dropped the subj., and turned to me.

'What can we do for you today?' she asked. 'Something performative?'

'No,' I said firmly, and outlined my confusion as best I could, ending up with, 'So should I limit my post to explaining that I'm not a racist, or should I also express sympathy for the people who identify with the blonde character?'

Arc made a pained noise. 'Neither,' said Xena, 'but if you must do one or the other, go with the first thing.'

'But why?' I asked, not really arguing, just wanting clarification. I was beginning to feel a bit blondely oversensitive, really, but I bravely hid this. I turned to Arc for more and better input. She looked uncharacteristically uncomfortable, which was, granted, interesting, but also alarming. 'I don't really have anything to add to that,' she said.

‘Valerie was just mentioning this,’ Xena mused.

‘And what were her words of wisdom?’ Arc asked. I winced at her tone.

‘She didn’t have a handy lesson plan,’ Xena said, a certain something entering her tone as well. ‘For some reason she doesn’t see that as her job.’

‘Of course she doesn’t,’ Arc said, sounding more sympathetic, but then seemed unable to stop herself adding, ‘And you’d know better than me what she thinks, I’m sure.’

Xena gave Arc a thoughtful look. ‘You know, I’ve sensed a degree of tension between you and Val for years now. Don’t tell me this is what it is.’

Arc looked, for the first time since I’d known her, utterly furious. ‘Don’t be an idiot. That has nothing to do with the issue at hand, and everything to do with you personally, Nancy,’ she hissed, and her eyes narrowed in a way Adage might well have envied.

Xena blinked, looking entirely discomfited. I was feeling e.d. myself by this point. ‘But, Judy,’ she protested weakly, ‘that was temporary, and it didn’t mean anything to either of us--you can ask Valerie yourself.’

Arc had regained her customary reserved expressionlessness, which under the circumstances was unutterably terrifying. ‘It meant something to me,’ she said quietly. ‘I could handle anything but that. And I did notice that you two stayed in contact, even during the times you and I lost touch.’

I was beginning to devoutly wish myself anywhere but here. The ninth circle of hell; the Patricic Rim; the polar ice caps, which might well be less chilly than this office: anywhere. I broke in awkwardly to drag the conversation back from whatever brink it was hovering on. ‘So what should I do, then?’ I asked. ‘What am I supposed to say? How do I balance the two things?’

‘The two things aren’t remotely equivalent,’ Arc said patiently. ‘There has never been a period of history in which blondes were captured, confined, transported, and forced to live in brutal, degrading conditions.’

‘Not that one doesn’t have fantasies,’ Xena said, and waited. Arc didn’t

bother to rebuke her.

‘And as well as not having had that history, blondes don’t endure systemic devaluation,’ Arc went on tonelessly. Xena murmured something that sounded like, ‘Quite the contrary,’ but Arc continued to ignore her. ‘It’s a matter of cultural capital, Mina.’

‘It is?’ I said, a bit fogged.

‘Look,’ Arc said. ‘There are more lawyer jokes than there are jokes about, say...’ She paused to find an example.

‘Fast food employees,’ Xena said, and I glared in her general direction. Some people are so insensitive to class issues.

‘Fine,’ Arc sighed. ‘Yes. But being a lawyer is still a privileged position.’

‘Which has to take the sting out of the thing, a bit,’ I said, beginning to get what she meant. ‘So you’re saying blonderenness comes with perks, and those outweigh the sneers?’

‘Something like that,’ Arc said.

‘So you really think I shouldn’t say anything?’ I asked.

‘Just listen,’ Xena suggested. ‘When people speak, try, sometimes, to listen. It won’t kill you not to have an answer.’ I wasn’t sure how much if any of that was meant for me, but I thanked them both profusely anyway, Arc slightly more p. than Xena, and left.

And I meant to just listen, honestly I did. Except I was still avoiding all those corners of fandom devoting themselves to wild speculation about self and former rival, so I couldn’t avoid the more serious corners, and when the exact same argument broke out again the next day I’d waded in before I remembered not to. I couldn’t quite remember how to phrase it, though. Had the phrase been ‘cultural capital,’ or was I remembering it wrong? Yesterday’s tension levels hadn’t exactly been conducive to learning.

But I thought I knew how to put it, all the same. ‘Look,’ I typed, ‘if blonde jokes were all that hurtful, there wouldn’t be bleach kits for sale



everywhere, would there? But there are, so the value of being a blonde, even a fake one, must outweigh the annoyances.’ All right, that may have lacked something of the scholarly note Arc had tried to inject, but I’m not an acafan, am I? I’m a BNF!

Of course a few particular morons tried to muster arguments to convince me I was so downtrodden I couldn’t even see my downtroddenness, but some people are just born to lose, and there’s no helping them. Most other people saw my point, and lauded its pointiness. Even the next issue of FG got in on the act, remarking that, ‘Unexpectedly, Mina de Malfois took time away from her hectic personal life and emerged as one of the more sensible voices in that fandom.’ I was slightly indignant about that ‘unexpectedly.’ Why, I’d been replete with common sense for ages now. About time they bloody noticed!

And my next act of sensible, I decided, would be to stop avoiding Seldom. Perhaps I could take him to meet Jen, even.

### 3.5 Mina de Malfois and the Wizard's Staff (part one)

The more I'd brooded over recent events, the more peeved I'd become. I was filled to the absolute brim with indignation by the time I went storming over to Earnshaw House, Seldom in eager tow, to confront Jen over this Razz Martini stunt. After all we'd been through--after summer camp! after Christmas Eve!--it wounded me that she could have made use of me in that beastly, callous way. How could she have used my fannish capital to re-establish her online pseud? How many pseuds did she need, anyway? She already had her much-admired and lusted over Josh Amos persona; heaven knows he garnered far more attention than any fiction ought. What was she, a shape-shifter?

It didn't help my mood that I'd been finding myself somewhat disenchanted with Sanguinity fandom of late. It wasn't just me; a sort of ennui seemed to have crept through the fandom as a whole. No one was out-and-out abandoning the game, but people had seemingly begun to drift off to other interests, no one of which was gripping enough, unfortunately, for everyone to feel compelled to follow. And of course, outside the game the exodus had begun, scattering people to backup journals hither and yon. Most of us were waiting around on these, as on a series of rafts, for some sort of Ark to be built.

Seldom had, as I'd fully expected he would, leapt at my offer to 'meet one of my real-life fannish friends,' as I'd discreetly pitched it to him. Not that that cautiously-worded invite was spectacular enough that I'd usually anticipate much leapage in response to it, mind you. It's just that the archive had lost much of its joie de vivre, Arc having left early to go spend the hols with her family, and most of the assistants being sunk in gloom and term papers. I expect my suggestion came as a sort of manna even before he understood the full extent of the adventure on offer. Once we were walking across the campus and I let him in on the rest--to wit, that the friend we were off to see was the fanficcer formerly

(and, irksome to state, presently as well) known as Razzberry Martini, well, a sort of graduate glee suffused his features. The boy fairly danced his way to the dormitory. I'd not have been much surprised if he'd burst into paeans to spring.

He was so visibly bucked up and excited I found myself feeling a little less irked as well. Perhaps, I mused, I should be shooting for an empathetic note. Undoubtedly Jen had erred, and erred badly, in failing to seek my informed permish to stage 'Razz's' re-emergence on the back of those photos. Undoubtedly, too, she was being awfully grasping in resurrecting a once-infamous pseud when her current pseud had already seized more than his share of fandom's attention, possessing as I thought he did that guarantor of perquisites: an imaginary penis. But confound it, perhaps she'd simply been infected by the same spring fever we'd all come down with. Maybe she was planning to change fandoms. I ought, I supposed, at least hear her out.

Jen's door, when we got there, was ominously ajar. That was, in retrospect, stunningly careless of her. Jen's room, when I tentatively pushed the door open, was decorated with several large framed fanpaintings, clearly original work, of Starsky and Hutch. Under other circumstances those might also have been stunning, but under these stunned-to-capacity circs it's faintly puzzling that they registered at all, really. Possibly my mind fixed on them in a desperate but futile effort to escape the rest of the scene in front of us.

Josh was lounging against his desk, jeans unzipped and partly pushed down over slim hips. And there was no doubt, now, about his Joshness. There could never be any doubt again. The fictional accoutrement I'd ascribed to Jen had, I saw now, a solid and undeniable actuality. Josh was corporeal, almost excessively so. It was Jen that was the pseud. And if the point had needed further underlining--which I assure you it really, really didn't--well, Rabbit was there doing her shocking best to underscore it. On her knees.

I shot out of his room backwards like a squid, and a cloud of ink to cover my mortification wouldn't have gone amiss. Seldom was looking green about the

gills, not that I could blame him. I was feeling a little g. about the g.s myself, not to mention guilty for having brought him along to this den of thingummy. The poor fellow looked beyond the help of footnotes. We stood frozen in the hall, transfixed with mostly-horror. We heard Josh chuckle, a low and horribly sensual sound, and he said something to Rabbit that I couldn't quite catch. Then he wandered out into the hall, still zipping up his jeans.

'Sorry about that,' Josh said offhandedly, ambling towards me. 'I have something for you.' I, understandably, backed up further, so fast and far I smacked the back of my head off the wall opposite his door. 'Are you all right?' he asked, stepping uncomfortably close, and he touched my left cheek with his fingertips, which did nothing to particularly increase my allrightness. I ducked to one side, and he looked puzzled for a moment, and then reached for my hand, which I pulled away and tucked behind my back for safekeeping. 'It's a gift,' he said, holding something up in front of my face. It was a gold keychain shaped like a tiny airplane, with a single key on the ring. 'I picked it up for you a while ago, and then kept forgetting to give it to you.'

I didn't particularly want to touch anything Josh'd held in his hands, but it seemed churlish to say so, and I couldn't just keep backing up forever, so I squeamishly accepted it. 'I brought someone to meet you,' I said awkwardly, nodding towards Seldom, 'but I guess this isn't a good time.'

Josh shrugged. 'I don't see why not,' he told me. 'I wasn't doing anything important.' I winced at this, and predictably enough there was a howl of outrage from his room. Rabbit shot past us seconds later, clearly in tears, and Josh casually waved us towards his now-vacant room. 'Won't you come in?' he said, and went in without waiting for an answer.

Seldom moved closer to me. 'Who is that awful person?' he whispered, as soon as Josh seemed to be out of earshot. He was starting to look more impressed than appalled, though, and I'd have been revolted by that if I hadn't been busy being revolted by everything else.

‘That’s Razzberry Martini,’ I said dryly, and felt a touch of smug satisfaction at his expression.

‘It can’t be,’ Seldom said weakly. ‘The pictures...?’

‘It is, though,’ I said.

‘But...the dorm,’ Seldom said. ‘St. Schol’s.’ And I understood his argument perfectly, even if he couldn’t manage to express it in full sentences.

‘He’s registered as a girl named Jen,’ I said quietly, and reflexively added, ‘Please don’t out him; they’d expel him for sure.’

‘Oh, no, I wouldn’t, I promise,’ Seldom said earnestly, making a crossing-his-heart gesture. ‘I take the necessity of gender subterfuge very seriously, you know. I’d never disclose this.’ I felt like rolling my eyes, but didn’t. ‘But how long have you known?’ Seldom went on breathlessly.

‘Oh, several minutes now,’ I said bitterly, and bravely re-entered Josh’s room.

Josh was pouring up snifters of brandy, which showed barrels more common sense than I’d have credited him with. He forced a glass into my hand, and gave me a concerned look from much too close a range. ‘That meant nothing, you know,’ he said, which the literary part of my brain scoffed at as a dreadful cliché.

‘Nothing to Rabbit?’ I said coolly. ‘I doubt that.’

He didn’t even look embarrassed, just amused. ‘It shouldn’t mean anything to Rabbit,’ he said. ‘After all this time, she should know better.’

I choked on my brandy. ‘After all what time?’ I asked, not particularly wanting to know the answer to this—it was more an expression of aghastness than an actual query. ‘How long has this been going on?’ He started to answer, but I waved my hands sloshily at him to stop, shaking my head strenuously. ‘No, please, don’t tell me,’ I said, stepping away. As I licked the brandy off the back of my hand I saw that Seldom was standing there with a pen and notebook. I

couldn't begin to fathom wanting to record this for posterity, but I've long suspected grad school has pernicious effects on the inmates. 'Josh,' I said, 'this is Seldom. Seldom is doing a thesis on gender or something in the works of Razzberry Martini, and I thought that as you're uniquely placed to help him, I should introduce you.' Josh looked delighted, at least until I set down my glass and headed for the door.

'You aren't staying?' he asked.

'I really can't,' I said firmly.

'Do you at least like the keychain?' he asked. Seldom was looking from one of us to the other as if we were a citation waiting to happen, and I certainly didn't want to prolong this closely-observed conversation any further, so I said yes, figuring that was the fastest way to close this discussion.

'It's the key to my room,' Josh persisted, following me to the door. Seldom's eyes widened, and the pen in his hand visibly twitched with excitement.

'Oh?' I said sweetly, goaded back to a comfortable state of sarcasm. 'You're going to start locking your room door? I must say I applaud the decision.' Josh smirked appreciatively, and I stomped off, possessed of a slight urge to murder someone.

Back at my room I sent Arc a long and heartfelt email. I spared her a full description of the lewdness I'd witnessed, mentioning only that I'd introduced Seldom to Jen a.k.a. Razz, and that by the way I'd definitely gone off Jen. I moved quickly on to my vague discontent, confessing to her the truth I'd been trying to hide even from myself: I was tired of Sanguinity fandom. I needed re-gruntling.

I dreaded falling asleep that night, but my dreams were surprisingly non-sordid, even though Josh did feature in them. Thankfully the dream Josh was fully clad, and with a fresh, innocent, boyish charm that I suppose owed much to my powers of repression. I woke feeling vastly less icky, though still

firmly resolved to steer clear of Josh and co. I needed, I'd decided, a break. It was clear I'd been running with too fast a crowd; no wonder I was feeling puffed.

And Arc agreed, even without the dubious benefit of knowing what I'd learned about Jen. In her reply email she suggested I spend some time renewing my enthusiasm. 'Leave Sanguinity alone for a while,' she urged, 'and go enjoy something else. Mrs.Sev and her friends are having a meet-up this weekend. I bet they'd love to have you join them.'

'You think I should attend a Tented Tartan meet-up?' I IM'd her in perplexity, hoping to catch her online.

'It's just some fans of the Dark Schoolmaster,' she responded. 'It's off-campus. Informal. Could be fun.' And she sent me the particulars, including clear and precise instructions as to how to reach the coffeeshop, before pleading social responsibilities and logging off.

I considered her advice thoughtfully. It was true that I enjoyed Mrs.Sev's company, at least when she wasn't detailing the particulars of her fictional devotion. And the Tortured Tutor fandom had several things going for it. To begin with, the series was complete; with the canon safely closed, the fandom was probably safe from wank and controversy. And the author was said to look kindly on most fan endeavours, or at least on those upon which she could look from any vantage point short of a courtroom. Perhaps Arc was right, and I should take a sort of mini-vac amongst the Dark Schoolmaster's devotees. I emailed Mrs.Sev and tentatively invited myself to her gathering, and was pleased but unsurprised when she promptly assured me of my welcome, urging me to join their new online community as well. Damned decent of her. I felt a sort of stirring of interest. Maybe I could write them a drabble or two, or some D.S.M.-inspired poetry. That should make them happy, I reasoned.

### 3.5 Mina de Malfois and the Wizard's Staff (part two)

There was a faint sound of sobbing permeating Malfois Manor these days. Stasia was, as she'd tearfully inform anyone who stood still long enough, in pain. Her tragically unrequited affections for Rabbit, and Rabbit's recent refusal to categorically state that she no longer cared for 'Jen,' had, I'd been repeatedly told, 'broken' Stasia's soul. I empathized with this rather more than one might expect, recent events on the Josh/Jen horizon having pretty much broken, if not my soul, several sections of my brain.

The whole topic made me deeply uncomfortable, though, and Stasia's being a constant reminder of it was functioning as yet one more factor driving me away from Sanguinity fandom. Arc, I'd decided, had been as usual quite right; I needed to spend some time in another corner of fandom, far from my usual haunts. Mrs.Sev's coffeeshop meetup would be just the thing. Although, weirdly, I'd had an email from Mrs.Sev letting me know that she'd changed her username. No longer content to be 'Lily,' now she was going by 'Lilybella' for some reason. I'd have to try to remember that.

When I reached the coffeeshop Mrs.Sev--er, Lilybella--and co. had already staked out one corner. I headed over to join them. Lilybella looked well, and also kind of sparkling--she'd evidently gotten into the glitter makeup in a big way, as her skin and hair glinted and gleamed and generally twinkled in the light. Darla was the only other person there I recognized, and I was mildly surprised to see her there, as I'd never heard her claim to be a particular fan of the Dark Schoolmaster, and heaven knows his fans aren't usually reluctant to proclaim their devotion. Perhaps she was a recent convert. Or maybe, like me, she was just bored with her current interests and was seeking something new.

'Now that Mina's here,' Mrs.--oops, Lilybella said--'I have an announcement to make. As you know, there are two major items on our agenda



today.' I hadn't known, actually, but I nodded intelligently anyway. 'This isn't in regards to either of those; it's just something personal that I wanted to share with those of you who are my particular friends.' I cringed inwardly. I was rapidly reaching a state of mind in which other fans' personal lives were high up on my list of abhorrent things I wished to avoid. Honestly, I'd be hard put to name a 'personal revelation' in recent months that I wouldn't have been far happier seeing shrouded in continued mystery. People need, in my estimation, to stop revealing things. Either that, or some sort of spoiler warning system regarding people's private lives needs to be instituted, so those of us who'd rather not know needn't.

Lilybella--aha!--was looking solemn. 'I know this will be deeply shocking and upsetting for most of you,' she said, and I swear I nearly jumped to my feet and bolted from the building. I could feel the tension and embarrassment-squick building in the air, like an electrical charge. 'It's about the Dark Schoolmaster and I,' she went on sadly. 'We...we've decided to try conducting our relationship in a new way.' You could, I swear, hear the ellipses. 'We've talked it over, and we've realized that perhaps...perhaps an open relationship would be the best way for each of us to heal from the negative messages about intimacy that society has inflicted on us. We...we've decided to see other people.' Everyone else gasped in shock, and I concentrated hard on not smiling. I mean, I try to be sympathetic and all, but that only goes so far, and I'm not quite sure open relationships on the Astral Plane are anything I actually care about, when all is said and done. Still, I reminded myself sternly, this was obviously meaningful to her, so I had some sort of duty to refrain from smirkage, and to be, well, supportive and all that.

After what looked to be a gratifying few minutes bravely, and with trembling lower lip, reassuring her supporters that this was all for the best, really, Lily called the meeting to order, and reminded us that we were there to discuss two items of importance to fans of 'our Beloved Dark Schoolmaster': the upcoming publication of *Unlocking the Tortured Tutor*, and the major new

theory sweeping the fandom, which had implications, she assured us, for the proposed interfandom merger. None of this made much sense to me, so I sat back and let myself be carried along by the conversational currents.

And very currenty they were, too. Beginning with the second item first, Lilybella kindly recapped said theory. I was delighted to learn, in the sense of being amused and entertained by a fresh piece of fannish lunacy, that the Dark Schoolmaster's devotees had decided to set aside canon entirely, and were refusing to believe the whole 'death' thing that had happened in book seven. They'd drawn up a list of evidence from the entire series to support their newfound yet deeply held belief that their beloved DSM had been a vampire all along--why the author had chosen never to state this, either within the text or in any number of interviews, was a minor quibble they didn't deign to waste time pondering. No, the evidence was clear: their b. DSM wore a cloak, was frequently depicted at night, and had the whole 'dark' thing going on adjectivally, so obviously he was vampiric, and it followed logically (according to their definition of logic) that therefore he couldn't be dead. Obviously he was undead. My head spun slightly, as one might well imagine it would.

'And therefore,' Darla said, when Lilybella had given her the nod, 'we in the Greater Vampiric fandom wish to take this opportunity to welcome the fans of the Tortured Tutor, and to extend a formal invitation to you to join us as an officially listed Vampiric group.' There was applause, which I joined in gleefully, and then there was a vote by show of hands. The group achieved near-unanimity on joining the vampire people; two stubborn holdouts, who clung to a kind of angelic heterodoxy, politely abstained. Lilybella made a brief speech.

'You are witnessing the birth of an entirely new, blended fandom,' she said importantly, 'drawing on the best elements of several sources, and providing us all with new opportunities for fannish activity and personal growth.' Was I imagining it, or was she blushing slightly? I mean, by any standard that speech was worth blushing over, and I personally would have

sooner died a thousand slow deaths than to have uttered a single word of such solemn lunacy, but I'd not have thought those in the throes of the thing were capable of being embarrassed by it, really. 'It's a sort of meta fandom, bringing forth the common threads that bind us.' Everyone made appreciative noises, so I tried to as well.

There'd been a lot of people coming and going in the background--it was a coffeeshop, after all, however much it might be beginning to feel like a private ward in a particularly creative asylum--but honestly, I'd been too absorbed in the conversation to pay attention. It, not exactly pains me to admit, but certainly causes me to flinch a tad whilst admitting, that I was having fun. I totally get why social anthropologists must love their jobs. Figuring out a group's norms and specialized language is enormous fun, and unlike the s. anthropologists, I didn't have to pretend to distance. On the contrary, fandom groups are best enjoyed whilst fully immersed and carried along merrily by the prevailing drift. So I didn't immediately notice the stranger that entered the room until she was right at our table, standing behind an empty chair. She shook her obviously-dyed brown hair--why, I wondered briefly, would anyone dye their hair a shade of Uninteresting Brown?--and a shower of white and transparent-ish glitter cascaded to the floor and all over the rest of her. My immediate impression was that she'd been getting up close and intimate with the craft supplies, though I couldn't begin to guess why. 'Hi, everyone,' she said, showily brushing the heaps of glitter from her shoulders. Before anyone else had a chance to answer, Lily had lept to her feet, teeth bared in an actual snarl.

'You bitch,' she spat, and I blinked in perplexity at the venom in her voice. 'How dare you?' And to my utter astonishment and partial glee, she threw half a cup of lukewarm coffee straight into the other woman's face, no doubt made bold by the knowledge that refills were free. The stranger glared back drippily.

'And how are things at home, Mrs. Sev?' she sneered. 'No problems

between the devoted, I'm sure.' She eyed Lily's own glitter meaningfully, and Lily hesitated, looking caught out.

I took advantage of the general confusion to lean close to Darla. 'What, exactly, is going on?' I whispered pleadingly, and she hissed back that she'd tell me later. The strange woman stomped off to the bathroom to mop up, muttering imprecations to the effect that we'd better not vote on the Guide before she got back, and a babble of embarrassed smalltalk flooded in to carry us past the moment.

When all were present once again, and more or less dry, Lily calmly regained control of the group and moved swiftly on to the second item on the agenda. As we all knew, she reminded us, and once again I seemed to be the only one there who didn't, Evan Darkerest's definitive online guide to the Tortured Tutor series, *Unlocking the Tortured Tutor*, was being published in print format. I sat up, interested. I hadn't known that, although of course I was familiar with the website, and had even archived my own Tortured Tutor essay there. 'I didn't know that,' I exclaimed. 'How wonderful for him.' Lily beamed at me, and agreed that yes, it was quite wonderful. The opening chapter, she mentioned in an aside, was available online for free download, and she urged me to check it out at the earliest possible opportunity.

'But is he allowed to publish it?' I mused out loud, and the rest of the table fell silent, giving me looks ranging from startled to appalled. This was, I saw at once, a social faux pas amongst their set. 'I mean, you know...does the author support him?' I asked, trying to amend my stance.

'That doesn't matter,' the glittery stranger pointed out, and they all agreed with her, though Lily did so with a slightly mutinous expression on her face. 'All that matters is that his book is sufficiently transformative of the original series.' I nodded, seeing how that probably made sense.

'So what we want to do,' Lily said, firmly wrestling control back into her own hands, 'is to hold a vote now on pledging our support to Evan, so that we

can assure him that no matter what some unsympathetic fans are saying, we stand behind his right to publish his book one hundred percent.'

It made sense that the Tortured Tutor fans would come out strongly in favour of the right to publish transformative works, I supposed, since even a casual observer can't help but notice that the entire Tortured Tutor series itself is, let's face it, heavily and obviously based on that Other Fantasy Series. Still, I wanted a bit more certainty about what I was being asked to support, here. After all, I hadn't had a chance to personally assess the thing.

'Are you sure it's, you know, transformed enough?' I asked Lily quietly.

'Oh, yes,' she assured me. 'It's very transformed. If you download his first chapter, and compare it to the first chapter of Book One, you'll see what I mean immediately.'

'Definitely a transformative work,' someone else chimed in, and everyone nodded.

'And it's a serious work, with scholarly merit,' the glittery stranger told me helpfully. 'He's only completed one book so far, but I've heard he intends to do seven in all.'

'How original,' I said wryly, but my wryth went unnoticed.

'All in favour of our coming out in support of Evan?' Lily asked, and everyone, myself included, raised their hands. I felt a slight sense of trepidation as I watched my name and aye being recorded in the official minutes, but after all, they had sounded sure about the transformed part, so it was bound to be all right, wasn't it?

### 3.5 Mina de Malfois and the Wizard's Staff (part three)

For some reason, ever since my afternoon with the vampire people and the fan I still thought of as Lily, I'd been banging my elbows off doorframes and tripping over my own feet. It was as if I'd caught something off them. This afternoon was no exception. I was standing in the stacks of the archive, hoping I was concealed by the brimming shelves of fanfic and etc. as I tried to get a look at what was going on in Arc's office. Her door was partly open, and I could see Xena sitting in there, lounging to the point of almost lying down in her chair and with her feet propped daringly on Arc's desk. Less daringly, but still more daringly than I personally could pull off, she was wearing black leather pants and an ivory silk blouse that appeared to be unbuttoned more or less down to her navel. I couldn't see Arc, and I couldn't hear what they were saying without ranging into the wide-open plains of the archive, but I was still so intently focussed that when one of the grad assistants, Monica, spoke to me, I leapt sideways and fell over. I was as graceful as a ninja, really, supposing you got the ninja very very drunk and then tied his shoelaces together when he wasn't looking.

Luckily I landed on something soft: Seldom. 'I said,' Monica was repeating patiently, 'they seem to have made up, if that's what you were wondering.'

'Oh, have they?' I said, struggling to my feet. 'Because they did seem to have a slight falling out over what may have been something to do with racism, possibly.'

'That's what I was coming to tell you as well,' Seldom said. 'Not the racism thing,' he added, making a dubious face. 'The making up part. Whatever it was they were acting chilly about, Xena ended it yesterday. She showed up with a bottle of red wine, and I heard her offer to let Arc in on one of her secret

sources of income, as a sign of trust. And then Arc shut the door,' he added, looking unabashed at this clear admission he'd been eavesdropping. But, really, I'd have been eavesdropping myself if only their voices carried a bit better, so I couldn't afford to be critical. I thanked him, and Monica, for the info.

'It's no problem,' Seldom said. 'I owed you, really, for that introduction.' I must say, that was putting a generous complexion on the thing. A hint of dubious had entered his voice as well as his face when he thanked me, but really, it was still damned gentlemanly of him to thank me at all. If our positions had been reversed and he'd done me the 'favour' of an introduction to Josh, I don't know that I'd have been being that gracious about it. More likely I'd have been casting blame and forwarding my therapist's bills.

And the information they'd given me was intriguing. I'd gathered, mostly from things PrinceC has said, that Xena's income was both considerable and highly mysterious; even her oldest friends, he'd implied, were variously baffled and slightly alarmed with regards to its sources. If Arc was truly the first to experience unbaffling on this point, even a partial unbaffling, the slight chill between them must have well and truly heated up. There was no point in pretending, even to myself, that I was incurious. I brushed off my clothes and headed boldly for Arc's office, tripping over some lint in the carpet along the way.

When I reached the doorway Arc and Xena were arguing. I turned my head to glare over my shoulder at Seldom, feeling misled, but he shrugged and looked as confused as I was, so I guessed this was a spontaneous renewal of hostilities. 'It's using an atom bomb to kill a bug,' Arc was saying. 'A harmless bug. A beneficial insect, even.'

'Why should I care, as long as it kills him?' Xena retorted. Arc started to answer, but Xena cut her off. 'No, Judy darling, stop. I know your opinion on these things. And in the abstract I might agree with you, but in this specific instance the 'transformative' line holds no charm for me. The little bastard is flat-

out defying the author's clearly stated wishes. At this point he's lucky to be breathing, let alone publishing.' And in an instant I knew exactly what they were discussing: *Unlocking the Tortured Tutor*. Which, by an interesting coincidence, was why I'd come to the archive today myself. I'd discovered something unsettling about Evan V. Darkerest, his forthcoming book, and his putative staff. Especially that last bit, about the staff – the staff that had, supposedly willingly, contributed to said book.

I'm not sure what image is conjured to your minds when you think about Evan's staff. Probably you don't spend a lot of time actually trying to imagine it. But I had had a vague sort of notion his crowd were probably casual fandom-scholar types: not actually acafen, but the sort of 'other professional' category of fans, schoolteachers and clerks and things, who wrote *Tortured Tutor* essays in their spare time to keep their minds sharp. Doubtless they'd all gravitated to Evan, my assumption had run, since he was the most devoted and energetic example of their type of fan; doubtless, too, they'd been quite pleased that he'd included their essays in his book.

All of which pleasant assumptions had been quite brutally dashed upon the Scylla, or possibly the Charybdis, of his Table of Contents. I'd cast my eye over it the minute it surfaced on the web, feeling I should at least know what it was Lily and co. had persuaded me to be supportive of, and was left gasping and sputtering at the unexpected revelation that my name was there amongst his staffers, and my essay was to be included in his book. It was the first I'd bloody heard of it.

This was the sort of Situation that wanted careful handling. Obviously my first impulse was to howl my indignation from one end of the web to the other, but BNFs can't afford to act on impulse. He could, after all, have a lot of supporters and sympathizers, who'd be offended that I'd taken offense.

And it could, after all, actually work in my favour to have my essay included; nothing wrong with spreading the old pseud to new corners of



fandom, who might then feel inspired to go read one's fanfiction or, better yet, one's original fic. On the non-essay front, I was feeling thoroughly chuffed about my writing. I'd just done a bit of fanfiction guaranteed to thrill the Sector Door people, whose nerves were a bit frayed right now, and who were, I felt, in need of some light, regenerative—or perhaps I mean restorative—amusement. I'd set my story amid the opium-smoke-draped hustle and bustle of the Victorian-era version of Paddington station, and was eagerly looking forward to the reviews. Perhaps having my name linked to Evan's staff would draw in new readers.

I'd already tried explaining all this to Liz via email, but she hadn't yet replied, and after all, even a trusted employee and friend can't offer insights that compare to the wisdom to be gleaned by finding a quiet moment to consult a Higher Power. So I'd come to ask Arc about it all. And I did, though Xena's presence was more than usually distracting (which is saying something). She snorted, groaned, held her head in both hands, leapt to her feet and paced Arc's office, and finally uttered an expletive and stormed out of the office, leaving me staring after her in astonishment. Seldom et. al. were all staring in at us, equally astonished. I mimed perplexity using only my eyebrows, and then shut the office door.

'Uh...is something bothering Xena?' I asked Arc cautiously. She looked amused.

'She's just realized she's going to have to do the gallant thing, and is upset that it's also the thing I wanted her to do,' she said mysteriously.

'Ah,' I said. 'Quite. Yes.' It both fascinated and unnerved me to have these little glimpses into their relationship. I moved awkwardly back to my own problem. 'So, d'you think I should be acting pleased or outraged about this thing with Lexicon Evan?'

'Pleased,' she said firmly. 'Letting people see you're upset won't achieve anything except the satisfaction of your enemies. Don't dwell on it at all. Put it out of your mind entirely, and when people start congratulating you, act

unsurprised.'

I blushed, flattered that she thought my little essay would garner so much praise, and after I'd thanked her for the advice she more or less kicked me out of her office—graciously, though—so I headed to a convenient computer to find things to distract myself with.

I had had a baffling communiqué from Liz. 'Opiates act as depressants on the Central Nervous System,' she'd seen fit to inform me, 'which is why opium dens featured people lying down.' All well and good, but why was she telling me? I don't write fic for *House M.D.* There are, really, no words adequate to express my lack of interest in the Central Nervous System.

More promisingly, I'd had an offer from Darla to meet her for coffee in, oops, half an hour from now. I sent her a quick 'Y' and dashed off to the caffinery specified, which luckily was within dashing range. I tripped on my way through the doorway, causing Darla to look up from a nearby table and wave me over.

'What on earth is going on with Lily?' I asked immediately. Gossip, or more particularly an expressed willingness to hear gossip, is an almost universally accepted social currency, and fandom is no exception to that rule.

'She's gone off her beloved Dark Schoolmaster,' Darla whispered confidentially. 'She's fallen for another'—a non-fannish conversation would have the word 'person,' or maybe 'man,' here, but I already sensed this conversation wouldn't—'vampire.'

'Oh, dear,' I said, carefully not specifying what I found alarming about this. 'And does he return her affections?'

'She says yes,' Darla said seriously, 'and I think she's right to trust him, because no one so perfect would ever lie. How could anyone made out of imagination and wishing and glitter ever lie? But a lot of horrible, unworthy women are claiming he belongs to them.'

'Ah,' I said, remembering the glittering brunette Lily had seen fit to

douse with coffee.

Darla opened her mouth to continue, but at this point Lily herself burst into the coffeeshop, looked around excitedly for us, and then tripped over the pattern of the linoleum as she attempted to reach us. I winced in empathy, but she pulled herself together quickly, and completed her headlong rush to our table.

‘Have you heard?!’ she said, and went on without waiting for an answer, ‘The copyright holder on the Tortured Tutor series’ — it took me a moment to realize she was referring to the author--‘isn’t going to oppose publication of Unlocking the Tortured Tutor. And Mina,’ Lily said, giving me a reverential look, ‘Evan says she mentioned your connection with the project as a reason for not quashing it.’

‘What?’ I said.

‘Wait, what exactly did she say?’ Darla asked. ‘She really approves of the project? She said so?’

‘Well, not exactly,’ Lily admitted. ‘According to the update on Evan’s site, the phone call from her lawyer was extremely hurtful, and he thinks the follow-up letter will be as well. He said she’d said she thought his book was a shoddy, ill-conceived, project and that it completely missed the point of her series. But he says he was also told the author was reluctant to cause any further distress to any of the idiots involved, and Mina, your name was mentioned.’

That didn’t sound like an entirely flattering context in which to be mentioned, but knowing the Tortured Tutor fandom as I do, I was relatively certain they’d be impressed and agog. Close readings for nuance are not one of the things for which they are noted. ‘How wonderful,’ I said, recalling Arc’s advice and trying for a note of unsurprised pleased-ness. ‘He must be so relieved.’

‘He’s ecstatic,’ Lily confirmed. ‘He’s going to throw a private party, just him and his staff, to celebrate the news.’ I tried not to picture even a little bit of

that. 'But Mina,' she went on, 'I have even better news. Better for you personally, I mean.' She reached across the table and grasped one of my hands in both of hers, pressing something into it.

It was a small plastic vial of black glitter. 'Thank you,' I said finally, having tried and failed to come up with any insight into why she'd think I wanted such a thing. She smiled, and dropped her voice to a confidential whisper.

'He said to tell you he likes you,' she hissed. 'Likes you likes you.'

'Who said?' I said, panicking a bit.

'My Beloved Dark Schoolmaster, of course,' she said, giving me a look so coy and meaningful I nearly swallowed my tongue. 'Or perhaps I should say your beloved Dark Schoolmaster.' She and Darla giggled happily, and I had a sudden vivid memory of what it had felt like to be in junior high. I extricated myself after another twenty minutes or so of this, and they let me leave their company unopposed, making merrily suggestive remarks as to why I might want to be alone right now. Well, Arc had been firmly right on one point: this was proving entirely effective in distracting me from Sanguinity. In fact, I can't remember when I last felt so utterly distracted.

When I headed back to my room and unlocked the door I was several kinds of dismayed to find Josh lying on my bed, arms folded behind his head. 'I'm the one with a key to your room, why are you here in mine?' I asked, trying to sound calmer than I felt.

He sat up, shrugging. 'It's all a glorious mystery,' he said, and reached down to the floor, producing a dusty bottle and two glasses. 'I came to apologize.'

By this point the list of things I felt Josh should be apologizing for was rather extensive, so I waited cautiously to hear which thing this was going to be about. He poured up two glasses of whatever and handed it to me. I sipped. It tasted of alcohol, licorice, and burning. 'It's the Tortured Tutor guide,' he

explained, managing to startle me. 'I persuaded Evan to include all the contributor's essays—I just thought it would lend some credibility to the project, I didn't look to see who exactly had contributed. Sorry, Cara Mina.' He grinned, not looking sorry at all, and I indignantly gulped some more of his alcoholic offering, which was beginning to grow on me. 'It all worked out so well, though,' he said, shaking his head and looking astonished by his own luck. 'Who'd have guessed you had so much pull in fandom?'

'I have enormous pull in fandom,' I said with dignity, though in point of fact I didn't know exactly what he was talking about. Obviously he'd heard I was somehow tied to things working out so well—which I hadn't even made up my mind they had; was I really happy with the author's abandonment of a potential court case?—but how had he heard? And why exactly had my name been brought into this at all? How had the TT author even heard of me? I couldn't ask, so I sat cross-legged at the foot of my bed and sipped thoughtfully at the refill he'd poured me.

The whole thing was very strange, and made less and less sense the more I pondered it, but then, everything about Josh was very strange. I giggled suddenly, remembering something. He looked at me quizzically.

'Back when I heard about your hosting the strip poker game at KawaiiKon,' I confessed, 'I couldn't work out how you were going to manage that. How Jen was going to manage, I mean.'

He smiled oddly. 'I was going to undress below the waist first,' he said calmly, watching me closely.

I was slightly baffled. 'What difference would that have made?' I asked.

Instead of answering he stood up and crossed to the door, locking it. I felt a thrill of foreboding, although actually things were moving so fast it wasn't very fore at all. More like concurrent-boding, really. And then Josh pulled off his sweatshirt.

### 3.6 Mina de Malfois and the Therapeutic Impulse

I pulled my gaze from the sweatshirt on the floor just in time to realize Josh was unzipping his jeans as well. A sort of tunnel vision riveted my gaze to them as they fell, so that for an eternity of seconds all I really saw were his legs, and his bare feet as he stepped free of the denim, and I distracted myself as long as I possibly could by looking around until I spotted his boots, set casually by the side of my bed, as though the exact disposition of the various items of his clothing were top of my list of things to be concerned about right now. And then I couldn't put it off any longer, and I looked.

Josh's nude body was perfect.

I can't even begin to qualify that. I can't even begin to process that, to be perfectly honest, but there's no point in pretending I can deny it, either. Josh's body was eerily, unexpectedly perfect.

It's not a reaction I'd have expected to have, really. Freud notwithstanding, I mean to say, I have never once felt any sort of penis envy, and I don't think I've ever met anyone else who has, either. When you really get down to the essentials, Freud probably should have been seeing some sort of kindly professionals to help him sort through his issues, I expect.

But I digress. What I was saying was, Josh's body had a kind of undeniable perfection to it. And I wasn't just feeling a sterile, aesthetic appreciation. In point of fact, I was feeling damned nearly dead of fear, and simultaneously faint all over with sheer lustful desire. I was in, among other things, awe. I felt like screaming or running away or dancing. I didn't know what I wanted. If Josh had chosen that exact moment to stride over and embrace me, I would have kissed back with full enthusiasm provided I didn't actually pass out or anything.

Josh, however, chose that exact moment to get dressed again. I went limp

with relief and disappointment.

'So you're,' I hesitated, paralysed by the fear of causing offence, yet also aware that every second that ticked away while I stood frozen in word-choice limbo was itself offensive, 'you're..'

Josh, or possibly Jen, nodded. 'Immortal,' he said. I blinked. That hadn't even been on the list of things I was wondering if I were allowed to ask.

'You're,' I repeated blankly, stuck on an earlier part of the conversation.

'A child of the Gods,' Josh said, as perfectly serious and seemingly sincere as a mad person or possibly a Californian. 'I've inherited much of my father's role, in fact.'

'Working your way up from the bottom of the family business?' I suggested, trying to steer this encounter back within range of sanity. A futile effort, natch, as I sensed it would be.

'I escort souls back and forth between the Astral Plane,' he explained calmly.

'Of course you do,' I said, and actually felt a slight sense of returning to familiar ground, there. 'That would explain why you're in fandom, too.'

'Actually, that has more to do with my hereditary role as a thief,' Josh said with a familiar rogueish grin that was, unfortunately for my equilibrium, approximately eleven-billion times hotter than as previously seen. God damn it, Joshen, I swore silently. That is not even a little bit fair, that thing you're doing.

I turned away and poured myself another glass of his alcoholic offering, gulping it down like water. Even when I heard the door close I couldn't pull myself together immediately, and when I finally turned around I couldn't make up my mind whether I was glad he was gone.

In my abject confusion I'd managed to knock something off the bedside table. This turned out to be the small vial of black glitter Mrs. Sev--er, sorry, Lillybella most recently--had given me as part of her plan to hook me up on the

Astral Plane. Now my entire floor was sparkling because the cap had come off. I scooped as much as I could back into its tube, promising myself I'd return it and express some sort of regrets re: my unavailability wherein the Tortured Tutor was concerned.

Maybe I should just pretend to have a crush on some other fictional character and be done with it. Granted it would be difficult to make that claim without smirking or laughing outright, but at least it would save me the further indignity of Astral Blind Dating. I mean, I'm sure I'm quite capable of making up my own partners, thank you very much.

I gave up at the halfway mark. The rest of the glitter was embedded in the cracks of the floorboards and under the furniture, and I may have inhaled some. Oh, well. maybe I could buy her a fresh tube of 'Midnight Glitter' at a craft store, although knowing her this one had probably been blessed. Still, it's not as if she'd have any way of knowing if I substituted a new tube, right?

I had the weirdest dreams, once I'd climbed into my narrow bed. First I dreamt of Josh. Unsurprising really. I'd have had to've had a cast-iron psyche to avoid dreaming about him at this point. In the dream we were back at the airport, and he was clutching my wrist firmly as we raced to catch a flight. Rabbit was yelling over the P.A., 'You're going to miss your connection!'

And then it changed abruptly, as dreams do, and I was in the Tortured Tutor's boudoir, my wrists now tied to one pillar of his bed. 'There were several errors in your essay,' the Dark Schoolmaster sneered at me, 'and I intend to show you the wanton vileness of your factual errors--skankiness indeed! How dare you! I am the sole possessor of your body and your will alike, and you will admit so before this night is over.' I woke before that got any more graphic, thank heavens, but that was slim consolation indeed now that I'd had a demo of the twistedness that lay buried in my subconscious. Probably, I thought worriedly, I should cut down on the fanfic reading for a while, and stop hanging out with the Astrally-minded. I dressed for work with shaking hands.



When I reached the library there was something going on in the lobby again. Two opposing groups were glaring at each other across a central space. One group, which I noticed Lilybella was at the forefront of, were dressed in black. It wasn't the excessive mourning black to which fandom is sometimes prone, but rather the sort of subtle black jackets and trousers which get worn by your more tasteful FBI agents and suchlike. If I'd just missed walking in on an actual physical spat, Lilybella's gang had clearly been winning, because their wedding-dress-clad opponents were nearly all sporting bandages and leg braces. Lilybella and co. had spotted me almost as quickly as I had noticed them, and she was gesturing frantically at me, so I reluctantly drifted to a stop in front of her.

'I need to talk to you, Mina,' she said, looking chagrined and tearful.

'Has someone died, Lilybella?' I asked bluntly, assuming circumlocution and tact would be wasted in this instance, since undoubtedly if anyone had it had all been on the Astral Plane anyway. Not much point reaching for phrases like 'passing over' if the deceased are already, at best, 'over,' and likely 'altogether nonexistent,' right?

'Don't call me that. And we're not mourning,' she informed me. 'Quite the opposite. We're staging a forgetting.' Someone on the opposite side of the circle glared at her, and after a few moments' whispered consultation this opposing group began to recite some sort of long poem with poor scansion, the thrust of which was that they longed for their Gentleman Vampire to materialize from the Astral Plane and share with them his icy sparklejism. I listened with increasing horror for at least fifteen minutes, and though Mrs. Sev made exasperated noises, she said nothing.

'They don't seem to want to forget,' I ventured cautiously. I didn't even try addressing her by name. I'd lost all track of what she might want to be called, and, quite frankly, all capacity to pretend to care. Online pseudos, I feel, are best

left online.

'That's because they don't understand how unhealthy their passion is,' she informed me, which I must say was pretty rich, coming from her. 'They're setting feminism back eons, Mina, and anyway he isn't romantic or gentlemanly at all, he's disgusting. And probably polygamous--that whole weekend borrowing thing, yuck. Let me explain it to you at length.'

I held up one hand to stop her, and tried to arrange my face into something expressive of regret and overwork. I could tell I'd measurably grown as a person since the last time they'd staged a major thing in the library foyer, because this time I felt I really could just not talk to them. I mean to say, I had a job to get to, and a mildly impressive job at that. Also, my skull had begun to positively throb with what I felt certain was the beginning of a Joshen-induced and fangirl-exacerbated headache. In short, I'd had absolutely enough fandom for one day, barring the lovely calming arm's-length academic sort one found at the archive.

'Can you ever forgive me, Mina?' Mrs. Sev was asking. I seemed to have missed something. 'My chagrin,' she went on mournfully, 'knows no bounds, darling.' Yes, well, neither did my confusion, and that headache was really beginning to pound. I needed to make my escape. I patted her gently on the arm, assured her we'd talk later, and headed determinedly up the stairs, to where some of the grad assistants had gathered to watch the goings on.

'In the midst of life we are in death,' intoned Ceswyn by way of greeting.

'Us more so than most people,' I agreed wholeheartedly. I gratefully accepted a cup of coffee, and used it to swallow a couple of aspirin, though actually I felt better already. Just being among my fellow calm intellectuals obviously agreed with me. 'Are all libraries this liminal, do you think, or is ours just more used for rituals than most?' We stood there for a while, looking down on fandom in perplexity, which when you think about it was pretty damned metaphorical of us.

'I blame the archive,' said Mary grimly. 'It attracts fans, and then...' She waved a hand expressively at the groups below. 'This stuff happens. What exactly are they doing, anyway?'

They'd all seen me talking to the fen, so I thought I might as well proffer an answer. 'I think the wedding dress ones are trying to channel a character down from the Astral Plane, and the ones in black are trying to send him to Hades or something.' None of the grad students looked even slightly surprised at this, which made me rather regret not confiding in them more often. I guess working at the library had exposed them to a lot, one way and another.

'You know, some people believe that there are three stages of reality,' Monica said dreamily. 'Like: an underworld, and then reality in the middle, and the Gods at the top. Or dreaming, being awake, and enlightenment.'

'Online fandom, meetups, and real life?' I suggested. Seldom grinned appreciatively.

'The Astral Plane, the library, and some other, worsser hell,' Mary said gloomily. There wasn't much to say to that. I excused myself politely, mentioning I wanted a private word with our boss, and slipped into the archive proper.

### 3.6 Mina de Malfois and the Therapeutic Impulse (part two)

Arc was on top of a stepladder, rearranging the usually unreachable things at the top of the stacks. She looked, I saw at once, upset. There was a certain something about her movements, a listlessness, suggestive of disinterest in what she was doing, and her face was set in a way I hadn't seen it set before. I hesitated at the foot of her ladder, barely noticing the shapeliness or silk-cladness of any calves in the vicinity. 'Hi,' I ventured finally, and added idiotically, 'Xena's not around, then?'

'Nancy is very much not around. Run away to sea, probably,' Arc said. She didn't sound as if she particularly approved of the ocean, somehow.

I didn't know quite what to say to that, so dropped the matter. 'In the mood for some tidying up?' I said, and could cheerfully have ripped my tongue out for the note of false cheerfulness it'd managed to produce. Why am I so bad at conversation, when I write fanfiction so brilliantly?

'What I'm in the mood for,' she said, sounding odd, 'is a trip to the children's literature section. The classics: midnight feasts in the dorms, boating, catching smugglers on holidays.'

There was a certain chilly something in her voice, and maybe a slight bitterness, and I was almost afraid to speak, or move. Or breathe, really. I was afraid of breaking whatever spell had been woven that had her, apparently--dare I even think this?--confiding in me. 'Was there a particular series you had in mind?' I asked cautiously, thinking that perhaps I could run downstairs and fetch it, every single volume of whatever it was, if only it would wipe that expression off her face. I couldn't, offhand, think of anything with holidaying smugglers in.

She laughed, but not in a particularly happy way. 'Oh, yes,' she said, and I know it's bad form to specify adverbs but it has to be added, wryly. 'What I

have in mind is something where your reliable friends matter to you just as much as the glamorous girl who can't be depended on for anything, or else instead of a surplus of diagrams about sails and tacking there are simple, never-fail hints for relationships. Do you think there's a series like that out there?'

'Er,' I said doubtfully, and wondered how outrageous it would be to hold her hand for a minute. I mean, they do in books, especially the sorts of girls' books she was on about, so maybe I could get away with it just this once?

'The Case of the Reformed Reprobate,' she went on. 'The Secret of Contentment Cove. The Mysterious Ability to Move On.' Weirdly enough, she actually was starting to sound better, as though indulging in whatever she was indulging in--nostalgia mixed with nonsense, it looked like--was bucking her up slightly.

'The Clue in the Stacks. The Hint in the Letter,' I suggested, and she smiled at me with sudden warmth.

'You're a dear,' she said fondly, which was so much more openly affectionate than I'd ever known her to be that I blushed from head to foot and stared wide-eyed. She sensibly ignored this and climbed down, smoothing her hair back in an unconscious little gesture of tidying-up that I read as putting the mask back on and pulling herself together. Sure enough, when she spoke again it was with her customary coolth and reserve. 'I think I'll work from home for a couple of days,' she said calmly, although clearly she wasn't back to normal, because she didn't usually discuss her schedule with me or, as far as I know, anyone. I steeled myself not to react, not wishing to spoil this suddenly-confidey mood of hers. She seemed to have said everything she wanted to say, though, because she started gathering up her things in silence, and ten minutes later she left, quite calmly.

Well. That had been something. I wasn't sure what, though. I felt slightly fluttery at the thought that this, whatever 'this' was, appeared to be that most impossible of improbabilities: a problem Arc couldn't solve. And close on the

heels of that came an even more fluttery thought. Could I? Because if there was even the slimmest possibility that I could help her somehow, well, then, I mean. I would have to, obviously. And I wanted to, I mean; it wouldn't be an imposition or anything.

But you know, really, when you get right down to it, there's nothing you can usually do for people, is there, aside from giving them the benefit of one's own opinions and advice. Which, while I am usually the living embodiment of self-effacement, I couldn't help but see I could rather excel at, in this case. I mean to say, there was dear old Arc, mooning around in some state of emotional distress that had her displaying actual emotions just as though she had them like anybody else, and here I was, calm and collected, and ideally positioned to remind her that some love is fleeting, but that serious-minded friendships with sound literary bases--as, for instance, that between an author and an archivist who have grown fond of one another--are perennial as the grass, and damned reliable besides. And more important than lots of other things, possibly including whichever other thing it was currently agitating her.

The only problem was, I couldn't quite picture myself telling her that. Well, no, that's not accurate: I could picture it, quite clearly, and had replayed the scene in my head several times, with slight variations, before I finally admitted that there wasn't much chance of my actually getting up the nerve to step into the heroic starring role I'd been visualizing. The other assistants were all trooping in now anyway, so it's not as though I could go running after her to discuss things further even if I had summoned up the nerve from somewhere.

But I'm a writer, after all. The solution was simplicity itself. I'd write her a letter. I spent my entire half-day of reshelving composing it in my head, and left as on winged feet when the time came to go back to my hopefully unoccupied room to write it.

On the way out a non-mourner grabbed me by the arm and mentioned that Mrs. Sev had been looking for me. It was urgent, the non-mourner said, that

Mrs.Sev and I have a heart-to-heart. That solved the problem of what to call the formerly-Lilybella, anyway. Muttering a silent prayer of thanks that she hadn't put in an appearance upstairs, I prowled the lobby until I found her.

She was sitting crosslegged, peeling glitter off a binder. Several of her fellows were busily decapitating the heads off photos of a cute young man. Stacks of glossy fliers surrounded them, proclaiming, 'One man. One woman. No puppies.' This would, I sensed, be a bad time to remind Mrs.Sev that the Tortured Tutor himself had a fair entourage of fanwives.

Several of the opposition were sitting nearby, working on scrapbooks, their wedding dresses spilling elegantly across the library floor. A lot of them, I saw, were cuddling marble rolling pins, the kind without handles that are just one smooth long piece of marble, rounded at the ends. 'What are those for?' I asked, curiosity temporarily getting the better of me.

'Trust me,' Mrs.Sev. said, 'you are happier not knowing what those represent.' I took her word for this--I'm not actually very good at baking anyway, so probably it was best I steered clear.

'It's so sexist and oppressive,' said one of Mrs.Sev's friends suddenly. I didn't know whether she meant baking or scrapbooking or some other thing altogether, so I made a vaguely supportive noise.

Mrs.Sev took a deep breath. 'I owe you an apology, Mina,' she said solemnly. 'I can never forgive myself, and what's worse, I don't know if he will forgive me, either. I've betrayed him as badly, and misunderstood him as completely, as that foolish copyright holder of his. Well, almost,' she amended. 'Anyway, I'm almost afraid to ask him for forgiveness.'

There was a pause. 'What happened?' I asked finally, reasoning that the sooner I let her share whatever her latest drama was, the sooner we could stop discussing it. She eagerly explained her trauma.

'I was dazzled, Mina,' she confessed. 'I was led astray, like a lamb to the slaughter, and I have only myself to blame for the part where I forgot my vows

of pure, complete devotion to my Beloved Schoolmaster. I willingly joined the polyfannous throngs of dazzled women. It was madness.' That, at least, I agreed with; I nodded encouragingly. 'Madness,' she repeated. 'How could I ever have thought that the Dark Schoolmaster's lordly arrogance could be replaced by some mere boy's fractional dazzle! I even thought, briefly, that I could offer you to my Beloved, Mina, while I joined the hordedom. Can you ever forgive me for tempting you with his love, when he was mine and mine alone all along?'

'Oh, absolutely, old thing,' I said, heartily and sincerely. I felt I'd had a narrow escape, there.

'His Glittering Darkness will forever eclipse paltry sunlight-dazzlement,' she said loudly. I started to wish myself elsewhere. A couple of nearby scrapbookers glared at her from over their lovingly assembled group-marriage photos.

'I'd rather have a sliver of attention from a beautiful man than a singular Astral Marriage to an ugly one,' one woman loudly informed her compatriots, showily adjusting her leg brace.

Mrs.Sev sneered. 'Imagine being so shallow and juvenile one would rather get worked up over dry humping than grow up and have a proper Astral Marriage. It's a complete failure to mature, that's what it is,' she countered scornfully. I made an appalled face, being personally unable to imagine anything much more revolting than either of those two options.

'What does this mean for the new alliance of the Dark Schoolmaster's fans and vampire fandom, though?' I asked, seeing a possible conflict looming.

'It won't affect the alliance at all,' Mrs.Sev assured me, 'as long as we can all agree to stick to traditional definitions of vampiredom.' At this the wedding-dress-clad contingent gasped in shock, and began, with whispers and hisses and outraged expressions, to withdraw, first retreating to a far corner of the library and then flouncing from the building altogether. Mrs.Sev looked deeply satisfied, and her black clothed supporters began pouring past us to offer their



congratulations.

'Now that,' one of them said admiringly, 'was chagrin.' Mrs. Sev preened.

'I really have to get going,' I said finally. I needed to go pour out my thoughts in a letter, although now that some time had passed since my initial enthusiasm, I was beginning to wonder if I should really share my thoughts with Arc. Maybe, I thought, I should write a confessional letter just as a form of private therapy, and then once a few days had passed and I had had time to think it over, I could choose which opinions I should share with Arc and which ones were, perhaps, a little too revealing. I mean, editing is the most important step in writing, after all, and I didn't want my impulsive urge to confide in her to overshadow my customary cautious approach to image management. Probably Arc, with her oodles of natural reticence, wouldn't appreciate being gushed over anyway. Most likely she'd be thankful if I exercised some reserve, and whittled down my first draft to something calmer and more arm's-length in the advice department.

### 3.6 Mina de Malfois and the Therapeutic Impulse (part three of three)

It was curiously easy to write a confessional letter to Arc. It was difficult to start, but once I'd cringed my way through an embarrassed sentence or so the words just poured from me. I found myself admitting more on paper than I ever had in my own head, even. I was strangely drained and exhausted by the time I got to the end of it, much too much so to launch into a second, more restrained letter. I stuffed the explicit one into a convenient bedside book, promising myself that tomorrow evening I'd cannibalize any of it that, on sober second inspection, looked fit to incorporate into my revised, sane, shareable letter. And then I'd burn the first one, and possibly bury the ashes.

I tossed and turned all night, plagued by hellish dreams in which I was washing the Dark Schoolmaster's hair in a basin while he berated me for not being prepared. 'You are ill-prepared for the coming trial,' he kept insisting. 'A new threat is emerging on the horizon, a more sparkly, prismatic threat than you have yet faced. Oh, sure, they look self-effacing and kind, but they bring madness in their wake, and invade your dreams. You'll be talking to them next, just wait.' I tried to argue that he was the only one invading my dreams, and I wasn't going to trial, but he wouldn't listen. I woke in the morning with my hands cramped from massaging grease off his scalp, and my head positively throbbing. It made for a hellish day. I kept nearly nodding off, and whenever I did, the insides of my eyelids seemed to sparkle. Luckily I wasn't scheduled to work, so I could crash mid-afternoon. All further correspondence, I decided, would have to wait another day. Also, I was going to have to borrow a vacuum cleaner or something and get rid of the trace glitter. I could no longer deny, I mean to say, that it was affecting me quite negatively.

Back in my room, there was a letter waiting for me, tucked into the graphic novel I'd left on the nightstand (volume three of the rather porntastic

Jane Bond and Clit Easewood series, in case anyone's curious). It had been delivered direct to my room by, according to the small note left with it, Josh, who also informed me that delivering messages was 'part of the family business,' whatever that meant. I assumed it was an effort to set that whole 'running from the Mob' story afloat again, and therefore treated it with complete indifference.

The letter was from Xena, which was astonishing enough, but even before I'd recovered from the thrilling shock of scanning down from the 'Hi, kid,' to see that the signature at the bottom was hers, I'd gone on to experience a whole other level of shock from the in-between, letterish bit of the letter. She'd gone, she informed me, on a short trip. 'Business more than pleasure,' she said, and added that I could feel free to hand that information on to anyone who might be wondering. Oh and, by the way, if anyone wanted to know more specific details, she was in Australia, and on that account I should expect any online contact to be sluggish at best and censored at worst.

I reeled a bit, and also, I confess, churlishly entertained the notion that I might not hand that information on at all. Dash it all, I wasn't a messenger boy. But I squashed that thought thoroughly, as it deserved, and guiltily wondered if I could perhaps send Xena a nice gift, maybe a book, to make up for what I almost hadn't done. People like books when they're away from home, right? I could get her *What the Hell Are These People Saying: An Introduction to Australian English*, or maybe *What the Fuck Was that Noise: A Guide to Australian Wildlife*. And I could march right over to see Arc in the morning, to ask her for Xena's mailing-address-while-travelling, which would be a logical way to introduce the whole subj., and hand on the news.

At which exact point I decided I ought to burn my confessional letter of the previous night. I know, I know, I'd been planning to use it as a source when I wrote the real letter, the one I would actually let Arc see. But somehow, the thought of going to see her in the morning while the first, all too honest letter still existed right here on the same plane we inhabited was just unthinkable. I was

gripped by a sudden conviction she'd be able to see the contents reflected in my eyes, or something, unless I destroyed it. So I opened up my copy of Gerard Way's biography, where the letter was stashed, and found, instead, another note from Joshen. 'Don't worry,' it said, with what I can only assume was inadvertent callousness. 'I got this--will deliver it to the Media Fandom librarian right away.'

In a moment of uncharacteristic religiosity I found myself praying for death--preferably Joshen's while he was en route to the library, but failing that, my own would do nicely.

I had been scheduled to work rather a lot of shifts over the mid-term break, and I now gave serious consideration to pretending to have come down with the plague so I could get out of them, but a nicely-timed call from Seldom put an end to that line of thinking.

Our Esteemed Boss, he informed me, had suddenly decided to go away for the break. She had left explicit instructions that we absolutely must work all the hours as-yet-unpaid by this term's grant, because otherwise next term's funding would shrink. So we were all to fill up as many shifts as we possibly could during her absence, even supposing it meant some of us spending nights there scrubbing the floors with toothbrushes--Ms. Silverman didn't care, as long as she returned to an immaculate archive, completed tasks, exhausted staff, and a full duty roster for which she could accordingly bill the library prior to submitting the grant application for the upcoming term. I dithered privately, but really, I could use the money. And I certainly didn't want any time to myself in which I could sit around thinking. Thanks to Joshen's over-helpiness, and my damnably well-written honesty, I could never face Arc again. And she almost certainly felt the same way--why else would she have fled so abruptly? I couldn't blame her, really. I've had stalkers myself, and, while flattering, it's mostly icky.

I felt like a crazy person, and speaking of that, I needed to buy glitter. A quick visit to the craft supplies section of the campus bookstore on the way solved that problem, but finding Mrs. Sev so I could hand over the replacement

tube proved more difficult. Aside, I mean, from the fact that I was scheduled to spend every waking moment in the library, undergoing a sort of torture whereby I had to listen to the others speculate endlessly about where Ms. Silverman had gone and why. The few times I emailed Mrs. Sev, trying to set up a meeting, I got no response. That was odd. I sent out delicate internet feelers, just to make sure she wasn't dead or anything.

She had, I heard from multiple sources, been less than reachable lately, and often vanished abruptly right in the middle of IM sessions. Sadly, several of these multiple sources seemed to be bandying that about as proof that Mrs. Sev was being pulled away to visit the Astral Plane, or to commune with the Astral Plane, or whatever verb it is one does with the Astral Plane. I refused to believe it, myself. If she vanished from the lobby of the library that would be one thing, but her inability to keep up her end of an online conversation suggested nothing so much as a wonky connection. Still, I didn't like this. I was starting to feel as if everyone was abandoning me. If this went on much longer, I'd be plucking at Warr1or's internet sleeves, or clinging pathetically to Ciyerra.

Enough was enough. What I needed now was advice, or at least someone to vent to. And with my usual advisers firmly in the no-go column, what with Arc being the thing I wanted advising on and Xena being unhelpfully Antipodean, I settled on Liz as a good, sensible person to consult. Sensible about everything but men, anyway, and that was irrelevant in this case. I headed gloomily in-game.

### 3.7 Mina de Malfois and the Burgeoning Tensions

'Don't look now, but the gardener's quitting,' Ciyerra said smugly, flouncing past me. 'And it's my day off, so I don't have to tell you where I'm going. Not that I'll have to for much longer anyway,' she added smugly. Useless at this juncture to tell her to use the servants' entrance, I supposed, so I had to satisfy myself with shutting the front door in her face as she stood there waiting futilely for me to question her. I waited a moment before peering past the curtains in the general direction of my gamekeeper's cottage, and found, blast it, that it looked as though she'd been right. His luggage was piled in heaps, barring the articles that were being eagerly carried to my front gate and beyond by scores of females. I frowned, perplexed and, I'm not ashamed to admit, concerned. Something was afoot.

By this time Liz had joined me, and was peering over my shoulder, She sighed, dreamily. 'He's so masculine,' she told me. Good heavens. Her setting must be really jacked by this point, if she was going all swoony and insipid with desire for Warr1or. I mean, I'm fond of him and all, but he's not exactly love's young dream in the eyes of most fangirls, what? Although I confess his avatar's latest garb, a sort of blue collar cowboy look featuring tight jeans, wasn't half bad. I wondered if he owned that outfit in real life. It would, I confess, suit him.

I shook my head, irritated. I had more important things to do than stand around thinking about Warr1or. I needed to go out and confront Warr1or, and find out if he'd really quit me, and why.

True to form, he gladly abandoned the milling females and, putting friendship first, came to sit next to me on a convenient stone bench. 'What,' I asked him, not wishing to beat around any bushes, 'are you doing?'

'Moving. I know it will pain you to lose me, Mina, so let me assure you I'm not formally resigning my position as your gardener. But I'm shifting my

things to the house across the street, and that will be my centre of operations from now on.'

'Ah, so you're buying property,' I said. I had to admit the wisdom of that. What with in-game financing being so strangely easy to obtain lately, he'd be foolish not to, really.

'Fans of the new television series having chosen my archive as their centre of activity,' he said pompously, 'I feel it's my responsibility to encourage the fandom to gather in a mature manor. And with the recent changes in Sanguinity Online economy, well...' he trailed off awkwardly. I nodded. I understood only too well. The SO economy hovered on the brink of complete collapse, and properties were going on-market at shockingly low prices. Thank heavens Malfois Manor was paid off in full, though it made me wail and gnash my teeth to think of the credits I'd expended on it, compared with the bargains the hoi polloi were snapping up now. But there's nothing you can do to fix the economy, once it turns zombie. You can't even throw salt on it.

'I blame the Sparklefen.' I blinked at that. I blamed them for a lot of things, too, but Warr1or was the first person I'd heard link them to our credit-point woes. Apparently it wasn't an original idea, though, because he went on, 'People are saying the mods offered them cut-rate credits and free start-ups just to lure more vampire fans into the game. I don't approve of that sort of manipulation of online populations, Mina. What about all those of us who got here through honest effort and Paypal?' It sounded like nonsense to me, and anyway would have meant the mods were at fault, not the Sparklefen, but if I'd said so he'd only have argued that I was biased by my friendships with people who wore glitter. I politely refrained from pointing out that his archive's 'male authors only' policy was pretty damned manipulative itself. Pierce and Jab fans, I'd noted before, can be a bit sensitive to that brand of criticism. Or any brand of criticism, really.

And speaking of the television show, which he'd been doing before this

economic theory had sidelined us, I had heard of it, but I confess I'd not yet had time to catch an ep of Occult, as it was calling itself. Possibly I'd dropped some sort of ball there, I reasoned now. I mean to say, if it was popular enough to induce fangirls to flock after Warr1or and act as impromptu Sherpas, it must be a pretty heady brew. Maybe I should read some fanfic and try to catch up.

'Hang on,' I said, putting together the relevantish facts. 'Isn't yours still a fanboy-only archive?'

'It is, yes,' he said, further seriousness settling comfortably across his avatar's features. 'I have sound reasons for making that decision, Mina.'

'I'm sure you do,' I lied blithely, not wanting to hear them. 'But how can it be a gathering point for the television spin-off fandom, then? I thought Occult had a huge female following.'

'But my archive is the single largest repository for Pierce and Jab fanfiction, and the associated wiki is, I feel confident, going to be even more huge. So it's where the fangirls want to be, naturally.' He preened, manfully.

'But what good does wanting to be there do them, if you won't let them in?' I persisted, held up by the largish flaw here.

'Ah. Well,' he said, 'I've opened up paid reader accounts to women, and I'm letting them use a designated readers' lounge, provided they behave appropriately. No lewd or tempting dress, no immodest conversations. This way they have a place to discuss the fanfiction they've read without intruding on the attention of Princely Plots's central user base.'

I digested that in silence for a few moments before it hit me. 'You mean to say,' I said, waving a hand towards his female luggage totes, 'that you're charging female fans money to read fanfiction at your blasted archive, and not even letting them comment directly on stories, but shunting them off to some second-rate bulletin board?'

He was unmoved by my indignation. 'It's a major concession for us to have gone even this far,' he said. 'Male fanfiction authors have their own



viewpoint with regards to the canon, Mina, and input from the female fans threatens that. Besides, it's not as though they're the only ones who have rules to obey. Everything that goes on in my space is carefully monitored by a select, trusted core of loyal men. The female fans are merely subject to tighter scrutiny.'

I snorted. 'And they're paying you for this?' I asked, despairing of humanity, or at least of fandom.

'Mina, Princely Plots contains classic Pierce and Jab fanfic of incalculable value to the influx of fans who've never played Sanguinity, and know the characters only through the show.' He sounded more than a little smug. 'Frankly, some of the fans would do just about anything to get close to our archive and its people. Body Count--that's our Women's Lounge--is thriving. I've reserved you an account there, in fact, just so someone else doesn't snag your username. And, Mina,' he went on, eyes glowing with pride, 'they say people working on the show are hanging out at the archive. Maybe even the actors themselves.'

This was alarming news, but perhaps a word of explanation is in order to help you better appreciate its alarmingness. Occult was still in its first season, but it had come with a premade fandom, because Sanguinity's creator had licensed Pierce and Jab for use in the show's entirely contemporary setting. Rather than Prince and serf, they'd been re-envisioned as cousins or something, boyhood pals maybe, I don't know. Anyway, one was firmly working class and the other more upscale, and they travelled around investigating paranormal activity. It sounded several degrees south of lame to me, but the actors cast as Pierce and Jab oozed sexuality and interpersonal tension, and thus far the buzz was surprisingly favourable.

Granted the re-envisioned PrincessB had been horribly and graphically murdered in the very first episode, but that had been, the fans pointed out, at the hands of or at least the handlike ectoplasm of evil occult forces, so it didn't count really. And admittedly, every female character Pierce or Jab had done away with had been an evil occult force, more or less. So that was all right.

'So what do you think of the show?' I was actually mildly surprised he was tolerating it at all. I'd have pegged him as one of those stuffy fen who don't like their heroes tinkered with.

'It's very well done,' he told me. 'Of course, the real purists insist that neither the television series nor the game can begin to compare to the original radio plays.' First I'd ever heard of those, personally. 'But I think it's fascinating to see how well the essential characterisation of Pierce and Jab can carry over to a new setting.'

A little more of this, and I wished him every success with his program of conquest and subjugation, although naturally I didn't phrase it quite that way, and returned to my own manor. Liz was still gazing out the window, dewy-eyed.

'Is he really leaving?' she sighed tragically. I hastened to set her mind, whatever remained of it, at ease.

'He's moving across the street, the better to oppress willing fangirls. Anyway, what do you care? You've never noticed him before.'

'But now he's poised to be the authority on Occult,' she said, brutally honest, 'and somehow that makes him impossible to ignore.' I should have guessed she'd be an Occult fan, what with her table-rapping religiosity, but I confess I didn't much like how that was dovetailing with her inherent susceptibility to make her look at Warr1or in such a heated way. It was unnatural, really.

Still, she did appear to be right about his impending success. If even half what he claimed was true, his archive was going to be much in demand.

And I heard no more from Warr1or during the next couple of days, until one evening I staggered home from the library in exhaustion and found his truck parked outside my door IRL. Warr1or stood leaning on it, hat pulled over his eyes as if asleep. I touched him on the arm, and he raised the brim to look at me

through red-rimmed eyes.

'The haters at the gates,' he said hoarsely, before I could even ask, 'had a man on the inside. Oh, Mina. It's gone. Someone deleted the archive.'

I hugged him, wordlessly. Well, I mean, what else could I do? However much he half-deserved it, I couldn't help but sympathise. 'Do you want to come in?' I offered helplessly.

He shook his head. 'I'm on my way to stay with PrinceC. He probably doesn't even know yet, unless he's tried to log on. But it will take a lot of work to restore it, and weed out the traitor, and who else can I trust?'

Now my heart was bleeding more for PrinceC than for Warr1or, but I still made a concerned face. 'What's missing, exactly?'

'All the fic,' he said, sounding dazed. 'Not just the full-length fics in the archives, but the commentfic on the message boards. All those conversations. What sort of person could do that? Our entire history, our documents, the record of our friendships--all gone. My God, Mina, I didn't know there were people that vicious and destructive in the world.'

I made another sympathetic noise, and he glanced up, his eyes filled with tears, and took my hand. 'There, there,' he said unnecessarily. 'Don't be upset. They may have levelled our civilisation, but the core of our fandom is its members, Mina. They can never touch what really matters.' I thought of reassuring him that I didn't give a damn either way, but it seemed unnecessarily harsh.

'Yes, that's true,' I said instead, soothingly. 'Your user base will survive, Warr1or. No one can touch your members.' He patted my hand gratefully, and I disentangled it from his discreetly, and suggested he grab a couch in the dorm's downstairs lounge and get some rest. He shook his head, bravely put his cowboy hat back on, and announced he'd rather finish the drive to PrinceC's condo tonight. I suppose he felt an urgent need for sympathetic male comradeship, or maybe he just wanted to keep moving so he had less time to contemplate his loss.

By the time I got inside I was almost too tired to focus my eyes, but I still touched base with my computer, and was rewarded with an IM from Arc, suggesting I ought to be in bed. It was something between a relief and a terror to hear from her, but of course she was too gracious to bring up any letters she might or might not have received. I felt a pang of what, in a non-BNF, would have been loneliness.

'You'll be back soon?' I asked her, casually.

'Hard to say. I'm as far away geographically as it's possible to get, and I still haven't tracked my quarry.'

My heart sank. I'm no geographer, but I know what's on the other side of the globe, and I well remembered Xena was, for the time being, to be counted amongst Australia's fauna. 'You're hunting, then? Or is this an archaeological dig of some kind?' Once the words were out I winced, hoping she'd take them as the light-hearted carefree metaphor they'd been meant to be, and not as some sort of remark on her age.

There was a slight pause before she replied. 'Not exactly. I'm shelving something properly, let's say, or labelling and closing a file. I like things to be..'

I waited, holding my breath.

'...tidy,' she finished. 'Talk to you soon.' And she was gone.

### 3.8 Mina de Malfois and the Relationship Upgrades

Warr1or had been reacting to the destruction of his archive in exactly the sane, balanced way we'd all come to expect from him. He'd stumbled across some sort of unfunny humour forum where people were joking about it, and immediately flown into a blind rage. When he started issuing death threats to people who'd committed the grave sin of finding it vaguely amusing that a site had been deleted, they banned him.

In the meantime, everything I'd heard indicated that most of the archive had been salvageable anyway, and thanks to a lot of time and effort from PrinceC and other unnamed geniuses, it was due back online very soon. PrinceC had told me, more or less confidentially, that he'd invited Warr1or to stay with him until it was entirely sorted out. He felt, he told me, that Warr1or really needed to relax, and although I didn't quite see how PrinceC or anyone else on the planet could accomplish that goal, I lauded him for trying.

And in a way, I was profoundly grateful Warr1or's archive loss was absorbing all his attention. There was a rumour going around that *Occult* was about to make a *major* deviation from canon as set in the game, so major that bringing them into this century and giving them a car and a surname *paled* in comparison. There was, if the Hollywood gossip could be believed, going to be a new character introduced: a secret brother to either Pierce or Jab, who would appear bringing not just news of his canon-warping bastardry, but proof that both Pierce and Jab had been sired by the same father.

I *know*. If that was true than they weren't just unnaturally fond cousins: they were brothers. With, like, a third brother no one had asked for and no one wanted. I'd heard about it because the most devoted fans were all over the internet, begging for donations so they could place ads on the side of buses protesting this development, said ads to belligerently insist "They probably aren't

brothers" in an admirable refusal to bow to canon pressure. Even I'd been hit up, and I'm not in the fandom. I can only imagine Warr1or's inbox seethed with the news, so it was good, really, that he was already too upset in other directions to be on top of this one.

Also, as much as I valued his traditional gardener's talents, I was rather glad Warr1or was shut up in the real-world luxury of PrinceC's pad, and not partaking of the online decadence afforded by Malfois Manor. Liz had been acting rather strange of late. Sighing and moaning at frequencies and intensities above her own average, I mean, and I had the most horrid feeling that this surplus of romanticism was directed at Warr1or himself. Liz had, over the time I'd known her, evolved into someone who was damned sensible about everything except men, but that can be quite a fatal exception, can't it?

Or perhaps I don't mean fatal--Warr1or, for all that he was deep into *Occult* these days, gave no signs of wanting to harm any females--but certainly worrying. Anyway, for now it was just as well he wasn't bulging manfully around the Manor grounds. Better by far that he remain safely banged up in the condo, where there was no one to be adversely affected by his throbbing masculinity, and only PrinceC to so much as set eyes on him.

I, in the meantime, had a perplexing issue of my own to work out, to wit, whether I should come down in favour of or strongly against anonymity. As this was a fandom issue, no useful middle ground suggested itself.

Pro anonymity we had free speech, protection from the retributions of BNFs and their patrols, the kindness of strangers, an open supportive atmosphere in which to discuss the workings of your bowels and uterus, picspam, commentfic from those too timid to write under the normal level of secrecy associated with a fake online name, and a sort of moral superiority imagined to accrue to the act of being funny, brutally honest, or creative with no expectation of return because no one knew to whom to attribute your humorous creative honesty.

Anti anonymity we had hate speech, hurtfulness, roving gangs of feral teenies, dogpiling, besmirching the names and characters of LNF for no good reason, breaking friendslock to screencap posts in order solely to mock them, and probably assassination attempts or something, I don't even know.

I confess I didn't really see the point of anonymity, myself. If no one knows you're the one behind your own words, how can they possibly appreciate how special you are? I suppose that just doesn't matter to really ordinary fangirls, but to BNFs like myself, it's rather crucial. BNFs are special *by definition*, really. Everyone knows that. Imagine what fandom would be like if we were all anonymous.

But if someone *wanted* to interact anonymously, and a sockpuppet wasn't an adequate level of mask, then it was pointless to deny them their anonymity. I mean, what if there was someone out there who longed desperately to tell me how much they loved my fic, but they were too crippled by shyness to comment? It would be tragic, in that instance, to deny them a faceless voice.

So I'd been hanging around at some of the better-known anon sites, alternately amused, infuriated, or bored by the slow and steady of accumulation of drivel that daily occurred therein. And it was there that I first saw him, little dreaming that some pseudonymous entity could be the means of propelling me back into conversation with Arc. But I needed, I came to realize, to warn her. Honour demanded it, even in the face of her having my should-never-have-been-delivered letter in her hands, or, assuming she'd read it, possibly the hands of a trusted therapist.

I should back up a fraction. The anon boards, you see, had their own code of behaviour, which most people adhered to pretty rigidly. Chief amongst their etiquette was the imperative that one comment anonymously. Posting logged in was frowned upon, or laughed at if it happened inadvertently. I didn't, as you might have gathered, see the point in wasting words on conversation that wasn't even going to be attributed to me, but the majority chattered happily

away, anon to anon. Except every now and then the memes suffered contributions from those who persisted in giving to themselves, if not a local habitation, at least a username.

And one of these, calling himself Jack in the Box, appeared determined to share the sexual urges that shaped his psyche, however little encouragement the anons gave him. They attacked and derided him with all the goodwill in the world, but still he commented. His evident goal in life was to have as many unknown people as was possible hear all about his fantasies. These, dear reader, revolved around young, virile males satisfying, and thereby sexually controlling, older women.

All well and good, you may be thinking. Or not *good*, exactly, but par for the internet. But that's where you're wrong. Because to my horror, as I watched his personal drama unfold, it became evident that he'd fixated on one particular woman as the creamy, dreamy ideal version of his fevered desires.

He had a crush on Arc. And not a nice crush, not that he'd have had any business having even the mildest and fluffiest crush on her. No, he had a lurid, vivid, horrid crush.

I almost didn't believe at first that he meant Arc when he said Arc. I mean, technically she is an older woman, at least older than, say, me, but the way he went on about age differences I thought perhaps the name was a coincidence, and it was some other, doddering Archivist to whom he referred. But no. My error possibly lay in the other direction; he harped on the age difference, perhaps, because he himself was terribly young. Which would at least explain the number of times per day he claimed to be doing...the things he claimed to be doing.

The more I read the more obvious it became, dear reader, that this guy was a contender for most Annoying Pervert on the Internet, if you can imagine any one person holding down such a title. It wasn't just that he was a tad twisted, so much as that he was utterly oblivious that not everyone in fandom wanted to



read repetitive comments about his Mother Complex.

And he was a smugly arrogant little bastard, too, responding to all pleas that he shut up or take it elsewhere with a kind of tone-deaf moral superiority, and casting himself as the one lone defender of older women's sexuality. He was apparently incapable of working out that his fetishizing them was not, in point of fact, doing anything for older women, other than making a handful of them sick on the internet. His righteous anger when the anons rejected his fantasies was very odd, given that the shrieks of "ewww" were (probably) coming from actual women, who really and truly didn't feel liberated, sexually or otherwise, by his urge to bed his mama or a reasonable approximation thereof.

I especially didn't want to see his frankly icky speculations about what it would be like to have "the lovely Archivist12" as his adopted mother, much less to see that in a comment which included words like "bulging." I could, with years of intensive therapy, perhaps have overlooked one such slip, but he brought it up so often, and with so little encouragement or reason, that I began to fear he might start to impose his attentions on her via email, or more horrendously yet, in real life.

Obviously I needed to warn her. The thing would be to find some way of phrasing the warning that someone had an inappropriate, obsessive, sexual crush on her, without seeming to refer to any recently delivered letters or anything.

It took all the courage I could muster to email her and suggest we needed to talk. Of course immediately afterwards I saw the perfectly obvious solution: I could have emailed her an anonymous warning from a sock account, couldn't I? But it was too late. She responded promptly, and asked if I'd mind dropping by her on-campus accommodation the next day. It was the first I'd ever heard she possessed such a thing, and sheer curiosity went a long way in helping me find the nerve to agree that, yes, I'd drop by at the specified address.

I'd never been at the Ada Complex before, though it was within a stone's throw of Joshen's dorm. I approached her apartment cautiously, but she had the door open before I had even knocked, as though leaving me no opportunity to escape. I stumbled over a suitcase in the hall, apologized, lurched my way to the couch, and then stumbled through an explanation of why I'd come.

She was remarkably calm in the face of the news she had an underage stalker, so much so I wondered if it had happened before. Smoothly she assured me her security systems at home were excellent, and she wasn't in the least worried. She sounded so thoroughly unbothered, and so certain she could cope, that I began to feel faintly ludicrous for having been concerned at all. Handing me a brandy, she smiled placidly and said she was glad to see me, as there were a couple of things she'd wanted to speak to me about. My heart shot into my neck somewhere, and I made a strangled noise and sought refuge in the brandy.

'First of all, I have something of yours.'

It was my letter. Still sealed.

'You didn't read it,' I said numbly, and then immediately felt like a cad. Obviously she hadn't. Now I probably sounded like I was accusing her of steaming open the envelope or something.

But she didn't look offended, merely slightly amused. 'It was, I know, addressed to me,' she said calmly. 'But I noticed it hadn't been stamped, and thought perhaps that was a sign it hadn't been meant to be mailed.'

My knees went weak with relief.

'And...the other thing?'

She looked almost hesitant. 'There's something I'd like you to do for me. No, that's not quite accurate. There's something I think you should do, for yourself more than for me.'

At that moment, I'd have willingly done anything she asked: abandoned my username, deleted my entire body of fanfiction, anything. And a damned pity I'd had that thought, because once I'd had it I couldn't, as a point of personal

honour, very well ignore it, could I? Even when she spoke the fatal words.

'I think, Mina, that young Jen has become a bit overinvested in gaining your admiration and attention.' Was I imagining a glint of something-or-other in her eyes when she spoke Jen's name? Maybe Xena had Told All. 'It's leading her to, shall we say, extremes. I think before she does any further damage, you had best set aside some time to sit down with her and talk. Please don't mistake me: I have nothing against Jen. I'd prefer, on the whole, that she felt a little more secure in your friendship. It would render her less troublesome overall. And I think it would be good for both of you.' And before I knew what I was doing, I found myself nodding in agreement and fervently promising Arc I'd make a playdate or something with Jen at the earliest possible moment.

### 3.9 Mina de Malfois and the Something Something

It came as a nastyish shock to find out that, once again, I'd had some of my work removed from a fanfiction archive. Not, I hasten to assure you, an elite archive of any kind, but certainly a very large one, with a reliably huge supply of readers. This time it wasn't a matter of anyone erroneously supposing I'd been unduly influenced by other people's works. No, it was a simple ratings dispute, with my work proving just a tad too steamy for those charged with thinking of the children in an official ratings context.

The emails and comments expressing outrage on my behalf were just pouring in, and if only I'd been in a better state to focus on them I'd have replied personally to most if not all of them. As it was, it was all I could manage to make a few posts urging them not to panic, poor dears, and to please stop offering to avenge me.

Naturally I was a little miffed, but I think I concealed that entirely, and merely shot off a quick note explaining to the mods that it hadn't been my intention to breach their medieval rules, and I would do my utmost not to do so again, reserving my wildly popular explicit fics for some site where adult, mature readers were allowed to make their own choices, free from censorship and jealousy.

If they couldn't handle a springing rampant faun as a metaphor for a young man's coming of age, and a few scenes featuring some creative usage of a narwhal horn, well, that was their loss. I don't see how that violates their TOS, anyway, although I suppose it did violate one or two other things.

It wasn't their fault, of course. Rules are rules, however stupid, and a quick read-through of the fanfics in question more than confirmed that, yes, they were definitely over the top as regards explicit passionate encounters. My fault entirely, although really, if only they'd known the chaos and explicitness my own

personal life had been thrown into, the mods might, I daresay, have had a little sympathy. It was a wonder I wasn't writing straight-out porn, given the stuff my subconscious mind was trying to process.

I couldn't help, however, spending a few days fuming over the injustice of it all. Other things, much worse than mine, were all over that archive. Clearly they were only singling me out because my fic was so well loved. However much I wore the mask in public, privately it stung that the mods had chosen to listen to the flammers and mentally unstable haters who'd reported me. The sheer unfairness made it hard to concentrate, and at night, the Dark Schoolmaster continued to haunt my dreams, although now he kept leering greasily and offering me a narwhal horn of my own. Which, of course, I no longer needed.

And then, after days of this--just as I was trying to find the energy to go upload my fic to some more tolerant archive, or possibly to start a dedicated community just for hosting it--there was a knock at the door, and I flung it open to find a delivery boy trembling under a huge gift basket. "Delivery for Mina?" he said, and I don't know why that was a question, since if he didn't know I certainly couldn't be expected to. I ask you, do I look like a delivery-person?

However hard it is to find good help to carry them, however, gifts are always welcome. They're especially welcome when you're, as a randomly chosen example, a humble BNF with a chaotic personal life, suddenly being persecuted by envious LNFs. And this one was sweetly cheering: it was a huge assortment of chocolate and candy and baked goods and two bottles of wine and various snacky things. It was from, as it turned out, Arc. How thoughtful of her, though a little odd--Easter wasn't for a month, and anyway, was she under the impression I was starving?

The note made no effort to explain, though it did display a rather remarkable lack of awareness as to what, precisely, had unfolded as a direct result of her suggestion I befriend Joshen. "For Mina," it read, "because variety is a blessing. Much love, Arc."

I did my very utmost not to take that personally. I mean, obviously she couldn't have known what had happened, and couldn't be condoning it, right?

You see, in an effort to comply with Arc's slightly unfathomable desire that I make Jen "feel more secure in our friendship," and thereby exert some sort of civilizing influence over her which would, Arc implausibly believed, reduce Jen's attention-hunger, I'd arranged to visit.

I doubted the efficacy of the whole endeavour, personally. Nothing less than a series of billboards devoted to her were likely, in my opinion, to rid the fanworld of Joshen-induced drama. But I'd promised Arc, so I was determined to give it the old college try. Or, rather, the old uni try, which is decidedly superior.

It was raining that Saturday--the one, I mean, right before the deletion and then the gift basket. I'd much rather have stayed in with my copy of *The Italian Curmudgeon's Grateful Bride*, but I couldn't manage to forget Arc was expecting me to make some effort toward socializing Jen. So I shrugged on my raincoat, and headed over to Earnshaw House.

"Come in," he called, his voice not just a study in melancholy but practically a major in it. I entered to find Josh sitting dejectedly on her bed, shoulders slumped in what I was soon to recognize as phannish despair.

"What's wrong?" I asked. His whole appearance was so alarming that I'd shucked my coat and was seated next to him on the bed before I'd had time to properly consider that course of action.

"Remember the Phantom of the Opera fandom?" he asked. Well, it's not something I much like to go around admitting in public, but back in the day I'd briefly been an avid phan. I nodded.

"Think of the worst piece of phanfiction you've ever read."

I tried to cheer him up with a lame joke. Really, it was hard to be madly humorous with Joshen leaning this close to me. "Everyone knows the worst piece of phanfiction was a published novel."

He nodded glumly. "Now imagine it being brought to the stage as the

official sequel."

I gasped. "They can't be," I said. He turned to face me, placing one hand on my knee in, I supposed, a comforting gesture.

"They can and are," he said. For a moment we stared at each other, eyes ablaze with indignation. Then I began to notice his were smouldering with traces of something else. I gulped. My frenemy was eyeing me with intent.

I attempted, desperately, to change the subject. "So have you heard the latest from Occult fandom? Apparently the money for the bus ad hasn't resulted in any, well, bus ads." I shifted nervously away. "So there're beginning to be suggestions that the money's been stolen. Only of course a lot of people are defending the person responsible."

You know, for someone who'd been all morose about phandom just seconds before, Josh looked entirely unperturbed about the possible theft. I've seen less-wide grins on anthropomorphic wolves. And less pronounced bulges. Oh god.

Afterwards, I half-danced, half-slunk back to my room, caught between elation and revulsion. It was an exhilarating, though confusing, mix. I tried telling myself that everyone needs one longstanding enemy, and one pleasant but completely unreliable lover, so really I'd been quite efficient here. Plus, you know: no more narwhal horns required. So that was one thing on life's checklist nicely tickied off.

But I can't say I felt entirely sure I'd done the right thing. In fact, I almost certainly hadn't. All I could state with confidence was that it probably hadn't been illegal, that it didn't seem to have done any harm, and that I felt queerly content.

If nothing else, it had pushed the trials of BNFDom, if not entirely out of my mind for now, at least to a backburner. So when I received notice that my fic had been removed, well, it wasn't as upsetting as it might have been.

A couple of minor points, though. The first was that Joshen, dropping by my room unexpectedly a few days later, was weirdly fascinated by the gift basket. Naturally I attributed that to the inability of the MNF to appreciate the depths of affection and the generosity of the outpourings we BNFs inspire. I mean, lesser-known fans probably never realize, but to us few chosen who occupy the dizzy heights, gift deliveries are a regular occurrence. I didn't say anything, though. I rather enjoyed the sense that my fame and adoring hordes were dazzling him.

And secondly, and more pleasantly, the Occult bruhaha over the bus ads exploded right around this time. I hate to be unfeeling, but there is nothing quite so entertaining as watching a fandom one doesn't participate in go off with a bang. This one blew up in a particularly satisfactory way. Whoever the nutter was behind the bus campaign, she claimed to have donated the entire proceeds to a food bank, thereby providing all the essential elements: an unprovable assertion, friends and supporters convinced she was noble and giving and entirely beyond reproach, haters demanding some sort of proof, like receipts or something. It was a thing of beauty and a joy forever.

Speaking of Occult, Warr1or's archive still wasn't back up. I wondered, briefly, what the hold-up was.



### 3.10 Mina de Malfois and the Vanishing Lady

I had learnt to regret my newfound interest in Occult fandom--learnt the hard way, indeed, that TPTB behind the show treated their fans with a degree of scorn and derision that made it damned near unfathomable that anyone would admit to being a fan of their work.

For one thing, I'd been on the brink of writing--been incubating, you might say--a bloody brilliant multi-chapter fic in which the Colt brothers underwent an epic journey from a city of ruin and destruction to a city on a mountaintop which would turn out to be inhabited by sexy, sexy angels.

A touch overblown, you might say, and I agree that for any other fandom it would have been a little heavy, but Occult not only lends itself to such excesses, it trots them out quite regularly as canon, and expects no one to bat an eye.

And therein lay the problem, for a mere handful of weeks after I'd started discussing my upcoming fanfiction (not revealing all the details and twists, you understand, but making it clear that I took Bunyan as my inspiration and that there would be an unparalleled degree of erotic tension) an episode aired.

I watched, dismayed beyond the telling, as my plot unfolded.

Now, I'm not given to paranoia, no matter what my enemies say. If that had been all, I'd have swallowed the coincidence as such, although it would have taken some washing down.

But in that very same episode the canon authors had seen fit to sneer at their fans and supporters by having the Colts state, in so many words, that they found noncon hardcore BDSM and watersports distasteful.

It was insulting to the fandom at large and to those with a non-standard sexuality in particular, but most of all, of course, it was insulting to me

personally. The fic I'd been brewing, you see, dealt sensitively, movingly, and I dare go so far as to say profoundly, with those very themes.

I tried not to dwell on how crushed I felt at learning TPTB would go so far to thwart and mock me, but naturally enough my friends and supporters flocked round to cheer me with their indignation, while the anti-Mina faction smirked up their sleeves.

The whole experience had left me feeling flat and de-energized, with no will or energy to write so much as a line of inspired fanfiction. Listlessness had seized me. I had no energy to do anything, unless IM-ing Arc for consultation counts as anything. 'I don't know what's wrong with me,' I complained, and went through my not inconsiderable list of symptoms, ending with my disinclination to put fingers to keyboard.

'Housemaid's knee,' she diagnosed promptly. I was, I feel compelled to admit, more than a little miffed at that, though I bravely hid my pain at this entirely unwarranted slur.

To add insult to injury, when I shared my tribulations with Xena she LOL'd and LOL'd, recovering just long enough to message me back that Arc was entirely wrong: it was obviously my liver that was at fault. I had the distinct impression that either they'd been discussing me behind my back, or, barring that, that they were telepathically sharing some sort of joke at my expense. I was not amused.

'What you want,' Liz said when I applied to her for sympathy, 'is a clump up the side of the head.'

I ignored this with quiet dignity, knowing it sprang not from honest reflection on my situation but from spite because I'd laughed at her for hanging a picture of Warr1or in the hall. She'd said that as a former Malfois Manor employee, and an up-and-coming BNF, it was only fitting that he be offered some show of respect, but I'd been too convulsed at finding out she placed a fresh rose in the frame every day to respond kindly. I know he has well-defined

abs and all, but really.

My nearest and dearest were, to a woman, failing to grasp the seriousness of my discontent. I felt sick to death of fandom, and when an intellectual BNF is tired of fandom she is tired of life, as I'm almost certain someone said once.

I felt poised on the brink of something really dramatic. More than once I caught myself checking out the online death notification services, and contemplating the ultimate flounce.

And then, as a reasonable alternative to death, I found myself considering publication.

It just so happened that by an incredible, indeed almost magical, coincidence, PrinceC, fresh and emboldened by his triumph in restoring Warrior's archive, had launched upon a most original and brilliant scheme. He was starting his own independent press.

And Joshen, who may lack discipline, follow-through, and, indeed, basic honesty, but who doesn't lack for flashes of sheer unparalleled inspiration, had made a suggestion.

I could entirely re-invent myself.

I dismissed it on first hearing, but on appeal I saw the merits of the case. I could, ran Joshen's argument, take advantage of PrinceC's business acumen, and use it to embark upon a fresh start of my own. There was a new planet swimming within fandom's ken, you see. That is, there was dawning a new day, and fandom had begun to stir with renewed energy as it prepared to throw off the yoke of our oppressors and make a bid for heady freedom. In short: there was a new journalling service available.

People were decamping at an astounding rate of pilgrimage. I had already surmised that I would have to set up new lodgings of my own there. I'd been planning to, all along.

But Joshen's argument was that I could use this move to leave behind the

old Mina, and invent a fresh new persona, a creator rather than a mere participant. I could rename myself, publish under PrinceC's umbrella, and start my online life anew.

I could be Mina Colt. Or Mina Daae. Or Mina Salvatore. The possibilities were endless.

I could be free of the constraints of my reputation as a BNF and a fanfiction author. I could publish my original novel, without fear that mean-spirited, small-minded people were out there poring over it in the futile but abhorrent hope of finding quotations from better-known fictional vampires, vampire hunters, and child wizards. I could even, were I so inclined, file the serial numbers off a couple of my book-length fanfics, and give them the wider audience my in-depth of secondary (though archetypal, and bloody nearly public domain on that account) characters so deserved.

I floated the idea past Warr1or, logically assuming that since he'd been much in PrinceC's company of late he might be privy to the most up-to-date info re: the impending press, but he seemed strangely reluctant to discuss the subject. 'PrinceC,' Warr1or texted me darkly, 'has secrets of his own. You might be safer keeping your distance, Mina.'

Arc, when I decided to seek her opinion and nobly overlook that she'd rudely implied I suffered injuries best left to the servant class, was guardedly optimistic about my seeking small-press publication, but dead against the name-change routine. I saw her point, of course. She had invested much time and effort clearing my name from this and that, and doubtless felt it would have been all for nothing if I was just going to ditch the old reputation altogether and go create a new one.

But damn it all, sometimes one wants an entirely fresh start, a new beginning that has nothing of the old self clinging to it, and this felt like just such a time. Admittedly I had not spent much, or to be more accurate any, time in the company of divers or harpists. Nevertheless, if ever someone were ripe to rise on

the stepping-stones of their dead self, that someone was me.

If I didn't make a clean break now, I reasoned, I might never make one at all. Years from now I'd be sitting on a heap of publications, putting on the cheerful mask to attend book signings and grant interviews, and underneath it all I'd be sickened to the core knowing my pseudonym was the self-same one attached to numerous fanfics, all well-written but some, it must be admitted, beyond the bounds of the socially acceptable. Even my proposed Occult fic, while undoubtedly brilliant, wouldn't necessarily have been the sort of thing you'd want tied to your pen-name forever.

It was all right for Arc. You could google 'Archivist12' until the cows came home, and no matter how widely roving the cows in question, you wouldn't find a single dubcon scene or 'cestfic in the time it took your abode to fill up with bovines. She'd apparently never penned anything even slightly dodgy in her life.

I, on the other hand, had written one or two things it might be best to shed, and surely the present moment, while we were on the cusp of a new journalling service, was the time to do so? If cusp is the word I mean. I might mean brink.

I went to bed feeling firm and resolute, determined to cast off my dead pseud.

Then I woke to a new dawn, and found that Arc had registered--and paid for--a new account for me, using the old pseud.

A stronger person than myself, and one slightly more flush with cash, might well have ignored that, of course. Part of me, weak and non-flush though I am, badly wanted to. I was distinctly aware that what we had here was an effort to thwart and outmaneuver me, and I chafed a bit. But in the end I charitably chalked it up to her having a personal stake in the not-inconsiderable fame I'd accumulated under the current pseud, and I decided to forgive her.

I cautiously began setting up house, and in the excitement of composing an entirely fresh userinfo it took me hours to realize that Joshen had, alas, vanished. Not just from our usual internet haunts, I mean, but from the campus as well. That evening I found a note at the foot of my bed, pinned to Jen's Camp Silver Lake t-shirt. Cara Mina, it read, Must dash. Have burnt some bridges, and heat is on. Will be thinking of you fondly, and often, and wishing you every success. Until then I remain, yours, [incomprehensible squiggle]. I have no idea how she'd got into my room to leave it.

I was, I confess, unexpectedly cast down at first. I'd only just begun to get used to walking across campus with Jen, or meeting for coffee, and it had been a surprisingly pleasant interlude, on the whole. But then, I'd never looked for stability on that front, and overall it was as well it had ended before Joshen had staged another outbreak of criminal activity or anything. It was a relief, really, to emerge unscathed and unindicted.

Besides, the new journal was very shiny.

### 3.11 Mina de Malfois and the Class War

He'd been right in suggesting our paths would cross again, because Josh and I did frequently encounter one another, though he never once failed to annoy me by vanishing without warning or explanation every time I'd begun to enjoy his presence. He'd pop up somewhere just long enough and helpfully enough for me to feel slightly obliged, then disappear, leaving me uncomfortably aware of the fully-charged obligation.

Take that time he massively increased my fanbase by making a judicious display of my temporary embarrassment of working-class cred. Annoying, in some ways. Still, as I said at the time, Josh, or Jen, or whatever name he might be making current use of, had done a very good deed in triumphing over that outbreak of raging online communists. Yes, Arc said then--as, indeed, she still says now when the topic arises, as it sometimes does, usually over a glass of good and reminiscence-producing brandy--yes, she said and says, s/he did indeed.

When it came to Josh, somehow it always took many bad deeds to build his reputation, but only one to redeem it. He was woefully easy to forgive. Probably that's why he never seems to run out of second chances to gain access to fandom's surplus cash.

Back when the events in question began eventing, I'd been watching that really creepy episode of Occult, that one where things come creeping out of mirrors<sup>3</sup> and as a result you're afraid to use your own real life bathroom unless you have your eyes shut. When my computer chimed I leaped to my feet, disgruntling Adage terribly. Adage was a temporary guest in my room while Arc was away that week, and was enhancing my Occult experience by such cat-like activities as staring fixedly at walls as though seeing something I couldn't. Naturally enough I was afraid to go read my new email, because I was at that point of irrationality when everything--the computer, the closet door, the space beneath your bed--seems a portal to certain death.

But I read it the next morning, when I'd mostly recovered. It was an email from a complete stranger, and the contents made me regret for several bitter minutes that I hadn't followed Joshen's recent advice and example after all, and vanished from the bloody internet.

I stood accused of being a traitor to a class I hadn't ever even admitted belonging to. How unfair, I ask you, is that? Some creepy little person with too much time on his hands had evidently devoted hours to accumulating every scrap of information I'd ever let slip about my personal life and was now, he informed me, poised to write an exposé, exposing me to the wrath of the downtrodden masses. My callous disrespect for society's labourers was, he promised, about to be brought to an end, and my disdain for their sufferings fully exposed. Fandom at large would be persuaded of my unspeakable snobbery.

I wouldn't have actually minded if it had stopped at that, in point of fact. I can cope quite beautifully with accusations of snobbery and elitism. But this incipient pain in the arse intended to go one step further and prove that I should be showing class solidarity, being that I was one of the world's workers myself and therefore ought, he insisted, to be uniting, not escaping. The gist of his screed was that he doubted my membership in the manor-owning class, and was ready to convict me of being a fraud, and of despising my own origins. He meant to prove once and for all that it was self-hatred that had thus far prevented me from ever fangirling the right characters. He mentioned Doctor Who fandom in a pointed way. And somehow, reading his threats, I was filled with a sense that I might cope altogether less gracefully with having my plebeian roots laid out for all to sneer at.

The nerve of the proletariat, insisting I admit I belong to it. I seethed, and seethed heartily.

When I'd calmed down enough for rational analysis, I began to doubt the



sincerity of his claims to represent the oppressed. I couldn't help but notice that my pridefully common accuser had taken as his soapbox an email address based out of a pretty posh university campus. To the suspicious mind that suggested he was rather upper-classish himself, and so somewhat less than fully qualified to speak for the working class. I mean to say, hardly an uneducated millworker's offspring, what?

If there's one thing I cannot stand, it's Gucci socialists. Tiresome and with more spending money than me: what's not to loathe?

A quick Google search turned up his blog, and my suspicions were confirmed. He was clearly much better-heeled than self. He had that teeth-grating combination of the right background and a deliberately declass   present. There wasn't enough eyeroll in the world to react to his strategy of under-deploying his top-drawer education and earning just enough to qualify for various perks and respites intended to ease the burden on the least-well-ranked of the rank and file. For a moment there he really did succeed in provoking a little class solidarity from somewhere deep within me: I felt a pang of almost Marxist rage on behalf of those who, like my mother, had had to compete with oiks like this one for finite services that she'd really needed.

Lacking Arc's virtual presence, I turned to my stalwart defender, PrinceC. He was as indignant as could be hoped, though rather less helpful. 'I'm being attacked by a Communist,' I told him, preparatory to launching into the full explanation of my supposed class treachery.

'You mean that stuff in the FanRecordwiki?'

'I do not mean that stuff in the FanRecordwiki,' I said firmly, and then paused in confusion, realizing I'd missed a step. 'Wait. What stuff in the FanRecordwiki?'

'Some pest with a grudge has been editing your page,' he explained warmly, 'denouncing you for being elitist, over-educated, and out of touch.'

For a moment I preened slightly, as who wouldn't. Then I headed over to check out my wiki bio page, and was a bit disheartened to see a longish list of links under the 'controversy' category, all leading to essays and rants about my being too well bred, lacking the common touch, in bed with the acafen, and a host of other accusations that one felt almost tempted to read as compliments. They certainly held a certain cachet missing from the 'how dare you betray your socioeconomic roots' line.

It was mildly gratifying to see that this second version of the attack was the one that had caught on. I suppose my masses of fans are so used to seeing me as the embodiment of a higher class that they only wanted a little winding up. Now someone had stepped up to do the winding. The Internationale had united them in a world of wrong, and they were hating me for being amongst their betters--which hatred, I should add, was a bit unnerving, causing the temporary gratification to dissolve fairly rapidly. After all, we BNFs rely to a shocking extent on the widespread support of our fandom brothers and sisters. It wouldn't do at all to have my popularity under threat from this Red Sockpuppet Army. They must be made to step off the collective soapbox, and fast.

The problem, revealed by a glance at the wiki's edit history, was that some dedicated revolutionary was making it his life's work to rouse them, presumably with an eye to having them hang me from a lamp-post and install some trumped-up populist fanfic author in my place. One couldn't quite avoid wondering if he was callously manipulating the masses so he could usurp my place within fandom. He certainly sounded as if he hated me personally, and in my experience, that's often born of sheer jealousy.

But I'm not one to leap to conclusions, and I'm not entirely heartless. I well know that nobody gets this upset about something unless they have some deep-seated trauma of their own, and judging by the passion with which this specimen was carrying on, his must have been something especially painful. Perhaps he was a redhead, or a barista. It's hard to say.

Possibly, I reasoned, he was a good person deep down, and hadn't realized the damage he was doing. I emailed him, carefully explaining that a BNF's name is her most valuable asset, and he ought to stop dragging mine mudward.

He emailed back swiftly, so swiftly I began to despise him a little as being one of those people with no lives who hang around online all day. Sadly, his time served on the internet meant he was as suspicious as I, and every bit as capable of off-the-cuff IP analysis. His email explained to me, in condescending tones, that I couldn't possibly be offended, because my IP address indicated I was at an acclaimed eastern campus, and the fees schedule for St. Schol's made it obvious I was a privileged undergrad with nothing in life to complain about, and no right to be offended by anything. The world at large could take his word for this, he concluded, because he himself was a member in good standing of the downtrodden masses.

I almost wanted to dig out one of my polyester uniforms of old and go head-to-head with him. Luckily common sense rebooted before I could do something so potentially humiliating.

In the morning Warr1or caught me online, and I explained the problem to him. I'd expected something a bit stalwart by way of reaction from him as well, seeing as how he seemed to be hanging around with PrinceC of late, but he was sadly uncooperative. 'I don't know, I think the man has a point,' he IM'd coldly. 'Fandom has far too many silk-clad spoiled brats living off their parents' money, and too few truly manly men who put their shoulders to the wheel and earn an honest living through the sweat of their own brows.'

I say coldly, but that had ended up sounding a bit heated, actually. Perhaps it was just some kneejerk reaction born of his redneck tendencies, with no real intention to wound. People can't help what they are, after all. Doubtless PrinceC would sort him out.

It obviously wasn't me he was upset at anyway, because he followed up by saying he had something to look into, and then he'd like to meet me for coffee. 'Oh, are you near here?' I asked, not displeased but not entirely free from apprehension either. Warr1or, bless him, is a bit intense to have around. I wasn't sure I was chuffed to know he was lurking around the campus.

'Looking for an apartment,' he explained. 'I've just accepted a contract to manage a coffeeshop near you for the summer.'

I was astounded, and said so. Somehow I'd always thought these cowboy types brewed their coffee over open fires. When we met late that evening I couldn't help but ask about it.

'It's what I've always done,' he said, as if amazed I didn't know that. 'I've been a java jockey for years. This will be my last contract for a while, though. I've been accepted to go back to school in the fall. Finally have enough saved up, too--because of course I'm paying my own way.' Of course he was. That at least was entirely unsurprising. What would Jab have thought of him otherwise?

He'd inflated his already impressive chest by several manful degrees as he spoke. One couldn't help noticing. Thank heavens Liz had never seen him in the flesh; she'd probably spontaneously combust.

'Business school?' I guessed, I thought shrewdly. 'Grabbing a degree and starting up your own chain of caffeine dens?'

He looked almost embarrassed. 'No. Med school.' As if sensing he'd betrayed the cause, he added quickly, 'Of course I'll choose a hospital that serves the rural poor, Mina. Not some silly clinic for pampered urban metrosexuals.'

'Of course you will,' I agreed. He probably would, too, poor noble goof. Still, even country doctors probably live relatively well. The best brands of cowboy hats and all that. I wisely said nothing about that, of course.

The conversation had driven my own problems entirely from my mind, but Warr1or brought us back to the problem at hand. He had news for me, of the

strategically useful sort. My detractors, both the 'Mina is too posh' and 'Mina isn't really posh at all' ones, had been posting at his freshly restored archive, and he'd noticed they were both posting from the self-same IP address. I hadn't two bolshie enemies at all, just one energetic one, trying to work both angles.

Armed with this knowledge, I still found myself stymied. What exactly could I do? I could relieve the mental anguish of watching him in action by killfiling him, but I could not stop him posting. No force on earth, apparently, could do that. All well and good to shield myself from the sight of his vile speculations about my income, but he'd still be out there, commenting and stirring up the rabble like nobody's business. It seemed inevitable that my cover was about to be blown: my years of careful class obfuscation, my cultivated vocabulary, my refusal to take a stance on cake toppings, had all been for nothing. I shuddered, went home, and stroked Adage moodily.

It was beginning to get me down. The whole class thing was bound to hit me particularly hard just then, and I'll tell you why. The economy being what it was, St. Schol's had tightened its belts considerably for the summer, and as a result the library was shedding staff like an improperly stored coat shedding fur.

Oh, I don't mean to say the actual librarians were in any danger--I rather had the impression they were beyond the reach of mere budgets and bursars--but the ground was beginning to be littered with a thickish layer of the corpses of discarded graduate assistants and part-timers like myself.

Like so many of my fallen comrades, I'd sobbed into the pink slip for a bit, swallowed my pride, and applied for a summer job in the cafeteria. Hardly a glamorous gig, but it would keep body and soul more or less together for the off-season.

And even with all the willingness in the world to stoop to such appalling depths, I was a touch anxious, as competition for even the most menial campus jobs had become discouragingly thick. I fancied my former employment history gave me a bit of an edge, not that my employment history is such that one wants

to mention it often or in good company. Still, I was awaiting the reply from the campus employment office with bated, or possibly even baited, breath. I didn't need the additional stress of this incipient fandom uprising.

After a bit of unrewarding thought, I decided to sleep on the class problem. I did remember to check under the bed, though, because I vaguely recall being told that's where one traditionally goes to look for communists. Under beds in general, I mean, not under mine in particular, although come to think of it, why should they be under beds at all? There doesn't seem much scope for activity down there amongst the dust bunnies, unless perhaps they grab you by the ankles and harangue you about socialized medicine.

In the morning I still hadn't been visited by any sort of cunning plan. I did bang off a moody email to the crimson nuisance, letting him know I was on to him, and that I knew he was faking his back-street cred. That night, I hoped, intimidate him into shutting up.

Of course it didn't. He whipped off a reply insisting that he was the absolutely legitimate voice of the common fan. His trust fund, he gave me to understand, had been small, indeed so small that in order to live in the kind of style to which your better class of undergraduates are accustomed he'd had to supplement his income by working in a strip club. And so there was nothing, he assured me, absolutely nothing he did not know about the exploitation of the worker, and in fact he was uniquely placed to emphasize with the peculiar discriminations faced by women and by sex trade workers. All of which, he concluded, left him fully qualified to school the rest of us, starting with me.

And then, abruptly, I was saved from fandom's induced wrath. The day before I got the letter offering me the slightly sordid but much-needed posish, Josh popped up online just long enough to redirect the masses' attention. I wasn't, he told them brusquely, the opulent target they'd been led to believe, and they were unfairly targeting one of their own. In addition to tossing off brilliant works of fanfiction, he explained, I spent hours labouring to earn my daily crust,

just as they did.

I can't say his post lacked for eloquence, and it was even more conspicuously awash with proof. He'd scanned and uploaded evidence in the form of signed and dated documentation, nicely embossed with St. Scholastica's seal.

It was the letter confirming I had the summer job.

'The thing I still don't get,' I later confided in Warr1or and PrinceC over a dashedly well-perked coffee, the product no doubt of Warr1or's competent oversight, 'is how Josh managed to get hold of that letter before it had even been delivered to me. He knew before I did. How is that even possible?'

Warr1or looked properly affronted on my behalf. PrinceC, still to all appearances comfortably fronted, just shrugged. 'He said something to me once about his father running a message and flower delivery service,' he said offhandedly. 'Perhaps it was something to do with that.'

Warr1or looked even more affronted. 'But that's an outrageous abuse of Mina's privacy!' he burst out. It was, too, and I was still smarting a bit re: having the world know I was up to my elbows in honest grease-cutting lather for the summer months. Still, there was no denying it had won me the admiration and support of the red set, hundreds of whom were promising to buy my forthcoming novel the instant it forthcame.

'It just goes to show you,' Warr1or was saying, 'you can't trust anyone who inherits their position, not even just a place in a family business. They just don't have the rigid, firm, upright-straining morals of those of us who strive manfully to make our own way.'

PrinceC stood up, kissing me cheerfully on the cheek before heading off to pay our bill. 'Just as well I'm starting my own publishing business from scratch, then. This way I won't compromise either of you.' He winked, and with a flashback to that night with Lord de Gravina I wondered what sort of compromising he'd had in mind. I mean, it would be a pity to rule it out entirely,

really.



### 3.12 Mina de Malfois and the End of Summer

Summer was fast reaching its conclusion, and although I'd suffered several months' toil amongst the dishsuds and plebes, I now had two weeks' grace in which to amuse myself before the full-time drudgery commenced.

I wanted, as I'm sure you can appreciate, to find something really meaningful to do. Left to my own devices, without a plan in place, I knew all too well that the hours would trickle away from me, wasted in refreshing capslock communities or writing dubcon f/f spyporn. No, I needed some concrete, worthwhile endeavour to refresh my soul and revive me from those dreary, sunlit days of summer employment. I wanted recovery, that was the thing.

What I ought to be doing, of course, was making some sort of decision about the immediate future. A momentous change loomed on my personal horizon. I had started the summer with a single credit required of me before my bachelorhood, the degree kind I mean, would be well and truly behind me, and that credit was mine now, or would be the moment they handed out the final marks for Pretty Manly: Maleness as Signifier. After that, homelessness would have loomed, but I'd taken the plunge and almost decided to maybe devote some considerable chunk of my life to graduate studies at St. Schol's.

The thing was, I hadn't so much decided in the sense of actually making a decision; it had all just kind of happened. That mysterious source of funds with which Camp Silver Lake had been funding my time here would, a discreet letter had informed me, continue to pay adequate sums to cover my tuition and board, provided I was up to par. To that end, it assured me, my grades had already been submitted for assessment by St. Schol's School of Graduate Studies.

And then said school had gotten back to me in turn, harassing me about making a formal decision re: the specific department I would be turning to for graduate supervision, and offering me a graduate student pittance in return for various labours. The pittance would never have been enough to support myself unless I continued my current kitchen drudgery, naturally, but it hung there as

an interesting offer, one I could take up if necessary--only of course it wasn't necessary, not really, because I had the Camp Silver Lake thing.

It all felt quite backwards to how I'd thought grad school worked, and now I had a bunch of choices to make that seemed half-made for me already, and was enrolled in a degree program with no clear sense of how I'd got there or what, precisely, I'd be doing. But at least I had the option.

All of which was simultaneously reassuring and alarming. Did I actually want to do graduate work?

In the 'non' column, there were the facial expressions of every graduate student with whom I'd ever been acquainted, who all sported the greyish pallor and dark-circled eyes of your less fresh class of corpse.

In the 'sic' column, they did all insist they found their research fascinating and meaningful, and claimed to quite prefer it to the service industry or the dole queue. Of course one had to take those claims with a largish dose of coarse rock or sea, as possibly born of sheer exhaustion.

And on top of the crucial 'to grad school or not to grad school' question, I was beginning to have entirely unforeseen qualms about my source of funding.

It had begun, I mean, to strike me that accepting continued dependence upon some mysterious pile of cash with which Arc was somehow connected might be, well, impinging upon my ability to meet her on equal terms. I suspected she was looking at me and seeing a brilliant recipient of this scholarship thing, which was all well and good but was, in the final analysis, a bit like being a brilliant child or a brilliant charity case.

Some sort of dignified though impecunious state might well, I thought, be preferable.

Perhaps I should hang on to my current employment, sadly *déclassé* though it was, grab my share of the going grad student gruntwork, and bravely embark upon further study relying on my own slender, indeed anorexic, means. I couldn't even count on my creative talents to supplement my income. I was at

that awkward age: too old to attempt to sell fanfiction on Amazon for profit, too young to attempt to sell fanfiction on eBay for profit. But one could, I supposed, scrape by.

It was all moot anyway unless I could decide on a department, pull together some sort of tenuous inkling of a plan of study, and persuade them to take me on. A lot of forms, and at least one really properly pleading letter, had to be got through.

And somehow the prospect of having to choose a subject on which to throw away several years of my life didn't sound like a restful way to spend my well-earned break. What I needed, I decided, was a distraction. I wanted some sort of adventure, during which inspiration would strike.

Then, adventure neatly concluded, I could dash back to campus, write up my application whilst newly galvanized, and await the results. True, I'd have to do said awaiting whilst shoulder-deep in dishes. But no doubt I'd be so energized by my exploits that that would be practically a pleasure. So. What to do?

It was at this point, or rather a point moments later when I was spilling my woes via IM, that Warr1or and PrinceC proposed we take a roadtrip. They had no destination in mind, but their immersion in Occult fandom had imbued the word 'roadtrip' with an entirely undeserved glamour. They seemed to expect that setting out on such a trip would automatically result in adventurous male bonding and noble, purposeful identity theft.

I'd seen just enough episodes of Occult to be suspicious as to my role in all of this, and worried briefly as to whether I end by being shot, stabbed, possessed, beheaded, or graphically eviscerated by either demons or angels. In the end, though, their complete lack of direction proved irresistible. I could take their idea and improve upon it, just as I have with so many canon works. I had my own personal reasons for wanting to do some reasonably localized travel, so as long as the boys let me chart our course, I was more than happy to join them.

I had, you see--in spite of the hellish hours I'd put in slaving over a hot sink--recently caught a glimpse of a kind of Holy Grail. I had just possibly found the perfect fandom.

Perhaps 'perfect' is the wrong word. It had its share of problems, to be sure. It had suffered outbreaks of acafen and, worse yet, aca-outsiders; it had, like every fandom known to humanity, been plagued by profiteers hoping to make a buck by persuading actual fans to write up lengthy wiki entries. It had its share of sub-par fanfiction, and the pairing smoosh names were frankly horrific.

But it was perfect for me, and I'll tell you why: it was utterly, undeniably, impeccably British. In fact, it was better than British. It was English. I positively yearned to immerse myself in it.

One slight snag had prevented me from doing so at once: it was so very British that the source material wasn't terribly available to Americans, and this put the full range of the historical canon, if not entirely out of my reach, at least largely out of my reach for now. What needed doing was for me to travel to the homes of a few American fen so that they could have the opportunity to burn me copies of all the episodes they'd downloaded, and magazine articles they'd collected, and so forth.

Sure, I could have found some of those things myself on the internet, but that didn't sound nearly as entertaining a vacation prospect as meeting a few of my fellow Anglophiles. Although in my case, obviously, I was much more near being an actual Anglo than merely a phile thereof. But I wouldn't rub that in; I wanted to make a good first impression.

So this roadtrip was just the ticket, really.

### 3.12 Mina de Malfois and the End of Summer (part two)

It was a dark and stormy night, and by the time we'd got our luggage stowed in the back of Warr1or's truck and ourselves jammed in the cab, I was soaked to the skin and feeling slightly murderous.

'We're risking pneumonia in these wet clothes,' PrinceC pointed out. I for one felt we'd be risking a damned sight more out of them, and evidently Warr1or agreed with me, because neither one of us responded. Honestly, the lad has sex on the brain. He's hardly fit for human society, outside of Torchwood fandom anyway.

Besides, I didn't want to sully the purity of my quest. I was setting out to collect the requisite information and connections necessary to full immersion in my latest fandom.

Our nights in tent or barn I'll skip over, if it's all the same to you. To be perfectly honest, I'd feel a little peculiar recording all the particulars, and to this day am haunted by a vague dread that PrinceC will get bored some winter's evening and self-publish a tell-all memoir.

I suspect Warr1or must feel the same way I do, only more so. Although at the time he tried to convince me he was taking it all in stride and it was all perfectly natural anyway, really.

Well. As someone wiser than I once noted, nature is what we are put on this earth to rise above. I personally intend to rise above that bit with a vengeance, and so no details are pending from this particular quarter. The truly curious are advised to go bribe PrinceC.

I'd chosen as my first encounter a prime example of what you might call an emotive fan: all keysmashing and enthusiasm, she didn't so much create fanworks or produce meta as just consume the source material, loudly and happily. A perfect introduction, I reasoned, to my new fandom.

I had not chosen wrongly. She met me at the door with a tray of what she called 'sammiches,' and cheerfully assured me the kettle was on and soon she'd

be pouring me 'a cuppa.'

Within moments of my arrival she'd plied me with dvds of all the key episodes, plus copies of magazines she'd had multiples of, and had breathlessly announced her favourite characters, pairing, and set, as well as the wardrobe choices she'd most admired and that week's episodes' best quotations and reveals.

She showed me her decoupage craftwork, all featuring her favourite 'hunks' from the show. She plied me with printouts of the online quizzes she felt best helped one determine which of the characters one most resembled, ought to date, aspired to look like, and should model one's house after (and which room one ought to concentrate on--mine came up 'Carla' and 'kitchen,' which can't have been right.)

My head spun just a little, but I was keeping up. At least, I was keeping up until she suddenly said something barkingly transphobic about a particular message board. I blinked. That had come out of nowhere. 'Over-run with what?' I thought maybe I'd misheard. I hadn't.

'Is that really important?' I spoke gently, in case she began foaming at the mouth or something. 'I mean, it's not as if anyone's genitals are pertinent to sharing episode spoilers, are they?'

'But don't you ever feel,' she persisted, 'like all the trans-whatever people and whatever are ruining fandom? You just can't have any fun anymore.'

For one hot, brief instant I had a vivid flashback to Joshen, my nemesis-and-whatever. 'I can't say in my experience they're particularly non-fun,' I said.

'But they're ruining everything,' she persisted. She was really stuck on the ruination. I enquired, cautiously, as to precisely how they were doing that.

'They're talking about things.' I awaited further clarification. 'All the time,' she went on, waving her hands around a bit, 'and all over the place, and they're always so serious. There's always someone dissecting every show and book, and talking about inclusivity and stuff like that. You can't just enjoy

fandom anymore without a gazillion degrees or something.'

'Can't you just, you know, not join in those conversations then?' I wasn't being sarcastic; I was merely trying to spare her the necessity of earning those gazillion degrees, which I can imagine would take a lot of time and would, admittedly, not be a lot of fun.

But she glared at me, eyes narrowed, said something under her breath about my being part of the 'politically correct brigade,' and swept out of the room. Damned awkward, as the room in question was her kitchen. I let myself out meekly, still clutching the dvds she'd been kind enough to burn for me, back during that ten minutes before she'd decided I was the enemy. You'd think by now I'd be fully inured to the vagaries of fen, but it threw me a bit to have been cast as the enemy on the basis of my perceived association with a set of people who'd committed the heinous crime of having conversations.

I suppose we Acafen are just a bit too intimidating for such simpler souls, what with our educations and vocabularies and opinions. We probably seem fiercely elitist to those beneath us. After all, they can only appreciate entertainment for its ability to entertain them, poor dears. They miss the broader opportunities for political-social commentary, exploration of sex and gender roles, and the denunciation of stereotypes, not to mention the myriad opportunities it affords to discuss copyright law and trademarks. It's a wonder they bother to watch television at all, really.

All in all the sudden onset of plebian prejudice had been a bit stifling. I'd be happy to be back among my own kind, and it was with considerable relief that I reminded myself that the next two fans I'd be visiting were each, in their own way, respected academics.

So it was with a sense of coming home that I climbed out of the truck--PrinceC and Warr1or were off to an Occult seminar of some kind--and mounted the stairs in a grotty-ish apartment building to the lair of Trisha Hill, an Acafan of great renown. No one who'd read her many posts on the necessity of

balancing creative freedom with correctly expressed views could doubt this woman's credentials, but even if they had, she very helpfully trotted out her credentials regularly, so as to let other online fans better appreciate the full value of her opinions. Her latest article, *OmNomNom Skin Tone: Middle-Class White Girls' Use of Comfort Food Metaphors as an Attempt to De-Other Characters of Color*, was renowned.

She greeted me at the door with a handful of small press comics and zines, explaining that they encapsulated the problematization-acceptance nexus of -isms in the fandom, so it was crucial that I have her extra copies. Without them, she assured me, I would entirely miss the Larger Issues which were the real point of the fandom, and might get waylaid into an unreflective enjoyment of the source texts.

I was, in a word, quite touched. I hadn't expected such a display of gracious condescension from someone whom all of fandom held in such high regard. Of course it seems silly in light of my own reputation, but I'd been just the teensiest bit intimidated at the thought of meeting her. Thank heavens my own sense of my fannish worth had reasserted itself enough to drop by.

PrinceC and Warr1or were looking a bit dazed when I caught up to them. 'The discussion centred around the portrayal of female fans in the Occultverse,' PrinceC said, 'so we felt a bit out of place.'

The last I'd checked in on it, the Occultverse had largely been portraying females of every stripe as corpses. I cautiously enquired as to whether this had undergone improvement.

'The general sense,' PrinceC said, equally cautious, 'is that the writers are portraying female Occult fans as over-emotive, sex-mad, and illogical. Preoccupied with male-male relationships.'

'And are they preoccupied with male-male relationships?'

'Not any more,' Warr1or offered. 'Now they're preoccupied with being stereotyped in canon.' He looked slightly miffed at this shift away from a focus



on Pierce and Jab. I suppose that's the peril of over-identification. I was tempted to point out to him that this shift showed his fandom was maturing, and eventually it would have complex discussions about nexises and -isms, but I couldn't come up with a good paraphrase of the issues.

That evening I could hardly wait to tell Arc about my finds.

So delighted was I that I chanced a phonecall to Arc, who listened patiently while i tried to convey the scholarly joy of fan-drawn soap opera comics. 'I'm thinking of stapling my map inside the front cover, so I'll always remember this road trip,' I concluded.

There was a faint noise, as of a sharpishly-indrawn breath. In a lesser person it might have been a gasp, but I hardly think Arc is the type to gasp. 'Staples?' she repeated weakly.

'Or I could use scotch tape,' I offered helpfully, and she moaned quietly. You might imagine, as I once imagined, that these professional archivists are a calm, placid lot, but in actuality they're damned high-strung. I decided it was best to shift the focus of our conversation away from the treacherous shoals of zine storage and attachment technology. 'Oh, who cares; I'll probably just toss them in my mother's attic with my old stacks of comics,' I said breezily, hoping to shake her out of this morbid preoccupation with preservation. I moved on briskly. 'Tomorrow should be interesting, Arc. I've got a meeting with a fandom researcher.'

'What sort of research?' I was relieved to hear the familiar note of crisp sarcasm had replaced that slight hint of over-excitement.

'She's a brain scientist.' I felt a frisson of doubt as I spoke the words. Surely they were more suitable as a description of Victor Frankenstein than of any present-day researcher? But perhaps it only sounded odd to me because I'm a layperson; possibly all the best neurologists prefer to speak in terms of Brain Science. I mean, she had a publishing contract, after all, so surely this researcher was the genuine article. I said as much to Arc, who sighed and then told me to

enjoy myself and let her know how it turned out.

Ray met me at the door in a lab coat, which was massively reassuring, though I thought it a bit odd that she'd chosen to wear it over white thigh-high stockings and what looked to be a garter belt. Still, once one's risen to the top of one's academic field I suppose you're allowed these little foibles. And it was immediately clear she was destined for greatness.

She kindly explained her research to me in simple terms. She was, she said, looking at female fans' fan-activity: writing fic, creating archives, organizing fic exchanges and charity drives, and etc. She could then explain these varied activities by looking at scans of brain activity taken by some other scientists using other female volunteers under completely different circumstances.

I marvelled at the spirit of co-operation that existed among these Brain Scientists, what with their willingness to share results and kind of cross-pollinate each others' studies like that.

'I wonder what it will prove,' I said eagerly, and she gave me a pitying look.

'I already know what it will prove,' she said, laughing lightly. 'The organizational and management skills evinced by female fans are just further confirmation that these skills were hardwired into the female brain through a process of evolutionary selection that began in matriarchal society. The drives and impulses that equipped our female ancestors to head up societies, found religions, and domesticate plants and animals still exist today, Mina, inside each and every one of us. We can witness them in the behavior of present-day fen!'

I was dazzled. I had never realized science extended to cover stuff like this. It was fascinating. I only hoped my own, non-scientific research would be half as meaningful and inspirational.

When next I boarded the truck, PrinceC and Warr1or were looking greenish. 'Anything wrong?' I asked, worried about them. After all, as male fans they relied upon me to manage and organize them. Science said so.

'Fanfiction,' PrinceC said. He spoke out of the corner of his mouth, barely parting his lips, as if afraid he might hurl.

'It can't have been that bad,' I said.

He shuddered. 'The RPF with the dog,' he said, turning greener.

'Don't,' Warr1or pleaded.

'The babyfic,' PrinceC went on, lost in some hellish vision. Warr1or twitched, and nearly put us into the oncoming lane of traffic.

'As soon as we get back,' he said firmly, 'I'm shutting down the Occult section of my archive, and deleting all the fic.'

'Good man,' PrinceC said weakly, and I gaped, shocked to the core at this proposed destruction. Apparently they'd both lost their minds while I was otherwise occupied. No true fan would contemplate such a thing.

'And I'm leaving the fandom. Forever,' Warr1or concluded. It was the grimmest and least flounciest flounce I'd ever encountered.

'Warr1or, old man,' PrinceC said fervently, 'I have never loved you more than I do at this moment.'

I sat in silence for large swaths of the return trip, mulling things over. I was still keen to get well stuck in re: the new fandom, but it had receded to the back of my mind somewhat, now that I'd met my new contacts. I mean, having seen two aca-stars, and having had a demonstration of the depths of intolerance that lie elsewhere, I felt freshly inspired to devote myself to my career. I could, I saw, do something really meaningful and profound for fandom by continuing on with my education.

But I wanted to do it right. And that, I knew, meant resigning myself to dishsuds and hard grad-student labour, so I could be reasonably independent and start edging myself into real adulthood. It was about time I metamorphosed into more of a Real Adult. And then I'd be able to meet the other Real Adults on equal terms, and not have to feel as much in awe of their research, since I could

reciprocally awe them with my own.

The worst part, I feared, would be notifying my dear old archivist that I'd decided to slip the surly bonds of scholarship and soar on into glorious impoverishment and financial independence. I feared it would hit her hard. But in time I hoped she'd cease worrying about me, and see that I'd given our relationship a firmer, more adult basis.

As soon as I was home I rang up Arc to tell her. There was a short, silent pause when I'd explained the sitch. I listened closely for the sound of sobs echoing down the phone line, but no one has a stiffer upper lip than Arc.

'I see,' she said, and I briefly wondered if she did. 'Well. A group of us are having a get-together to celebrate the start of another year, and raise a few glasses to the new recruits. Why don't you come out and spend the weekend with us?'

It wasn't quite 'why don't you come out and spend the weekend with me.'

But it was a start.

## **Entire Complacency and Satisfaction**

### **Written for Gnomad, Yuletide Madness 2009**

Of course throughout grad school I'd been spending weekends and hols at Arc's place, for the most part, except when events interfered. The fallout from that time I hosted a convention dedicated to my fanfiction took up all of one Christmas break, and I lost several weekends and one entire Easter bailing Joshen out of a couple of prisons and several mishaps. But generally speaking, I was a welcome guest at her house and also at her apartment, and could be confident of finding a place to lie my head, as well as a toothbrush and my preferred brand of toothpaste in the morning.

The thing was, though, Arc is so damnably organised on all fronts including that of hospitality that I was never quite sure if I'd been elevated to any status above mere cherished guest. I mean, there'd been moments too intimate to record, and I knew she was fond of me and all. But when you got right down to it, what did the toothbrush--and the pyjamas in my size, and even the monogrammed bath towels--really mean? They could have signified anything or nothing.

I'd seen, with my own eyes, that she could at the drop of a hat whip out toothbrushes fresh in their packaging for a whole van full of snowstorm-stranded fans with no advance notice whatsoever. And her friends all seemed to have things left at her place--nightclothes and spare pairs of glasses and the like. So I didn't know if she thought of us as a unit, or if I was just another something-or-other.

It wasn't like she was Nancy. She hyperventilated and tugged at her collar as though being strangled if having someone park a toothbrush at her place so much as came up in conversation. I'd seen that with my own eyes, too, and it was the first I'd ever realised that 'fear of commitment ' wasn't just a convenient phrase but was, in her case, a rather mild way of describing a flat-out phobia. Funny she never seemed to mind strewing her own stuff around other

people's places.

Arc had enough of Nancy's possessions lying around that I'd almost felt the slightest tinge of insecurity, until one night Nancy crashed on my floor, and left behind half her wardrobe, a stack of books, several unopened letters, and a handgun. After I'd been around them for a while I accepted it as just one of her things. Perhaps she was marking territory, or maybe it made her feel closer to us to know we were tripping over her belongings. She also, for the record, couldn't travel anywhere without getting several of us running around after her, mailing her her preferred brand of under-eye cream, or her favourite candy, or bottles of soda, none of which could ever be purchased in whatever country she was wandering through, and all of which cost a small fortune to procure and mail out.

But anyway, I didn't know if I was just Arc's most frequent guest, or if we kind of almost lived together, until after I'd left fandom (I'd thought forever) by faking my own death, thinking to pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion. I'd had to go underground, you see, because I'd published an absolute smash of a novel, and while I was entirely grateful for the unexpected financial boon it brought me I didn't quite want anyone guessing that I was its author. People might misunderstand that I'd been tapping into the zeitgeist; they might think those were my own insipid fantasies, written there in splashes of purple prose, Mary Sues, and appalling stalker-ish heroes.

So I'd gone underground, entirely avoiding fandom while it variously embraced and denounced the novel, and instead busied myself buying property. Not, alas, a manor, but a quite nice little condo. I spent my first nights there in a sleeping bag, and then when I'd finally bought bedroom furniture I almost had to use the sleeping bag again, on top of the bed, because I'd forgotten sheets and bedclothes. We can't all be like Arc, I told myself.

Then there was a knock at the door, and it was a package for me, full of Egyptian cotton sheets and huge bath towels. I felt that mix of pleasure and

annoyance that comes from being well taken care of in a way that hints that the other party thinks you incompetent to take care of yourself. And then, hanging the towels, I noticed something: they were monogrammed. Not with my initials, though. With Arc's.

So were the sheets.

I called her. 'Some of your stuff,' I said politely, 'has been delivered to my apartment.'

'Well, yes,' she said calmly. 'You know I can't get to sleep on anything with a thread count below 380.'

And that was how I knew.

### *Kissing Cousins*

[Note: I owe [scifantasy](#) for suggesting the Baldur/mistletoe myth, [amy\\_star](#) for reminding me of the Magic Box Of Hair Metal Cassettes and for making me write a closing paragraph, [ap\\_aelfwine](#) for the codpiece, and, as always, The Clives for turning this from me-ese into readable English.

Also, this post is being left unflocked so I can show it to a couple of people who wouldn't otherwise see it; apologies in advance to any puzzled *Supernatural* fans who may note *Occult* is a bit...familiar.]

**Title:** Kissing Cousins

**Fandom:** Occult

**Author:** Anon

**Disclaimer:** These characters and settings belong to their creator, not the author of the fanfiction, and *Princely Plots* disclaims all responsibility for copyright infringement.

**Warnings:** Some readers have pointed out that this sounds like slash, and therefore has no place in the PP archive, but a careful reading shows that all events are necessitated by the plot, so we're letting it stand. Also, it *is* canon that Jab sometimes wears a magic codpiece. ~Warr1or

The road stretched out before them, empty except for the Fury, which purred and throbbed beneath their thighs. The radio had long since died, the one functional classic rock station dissolving by degrees into static, until finally Jab had wordlessly acknowledged defeat by reaching out to switch it off. The missing Magic Box Of Hair Metal Cassettes, recently stolen by some skank of a demon, was a sore point right now. They drove in silence for a while, until his impatience peaked. "So tell me about this case."

Pierce shook his head. "I'm not so sure this is a case."



"There've been, what, two attempted kidnappings? Sounds like a case."

"There are kidnappings every day, and most of them aren't our kind of case," Pierce pointed out. "Besides, I'm not sure this is even real."

Jab waited, and Pierce explained. "I mean...mall kidnappings? Of teenage girls? It sounds like an urban legend. There have been rashes of this sort of story since back in the eighties, and they never trace back to anything real. It's probably just some rumour, blown up out of nothing."

"Teenage girls?" Jab asked, looking less ready to fall asleep at the wheel.

"Down, boy. But, yeah: the two attempted 'kidnappings' involve girls from the local high school, who were hanging around the Mistletoe Grotto."

"Do I even want to know what a Mistletoe Grotto is?"

"According to the high school website, it's a sort of kissing booth, and they're using it to raise money for the local food bank," Pierce said, shrugging. "And now two girls--not volunteers, they were just hanging around--are claiming to have been drugged by someone who tried to kidnap them."

Jab said nothing, and didn't lift his eyes from the road ahead, but Pierce saw the tiny smirk on his face and sighed heavily. "Jail. Bait," he said tersely through clenched teeth.

"What? Did I say anything? I said nothing," Jab protested.

"You didn't have to. You had that 'teenage girls at a kissing booth' look."

"I have a specific *look* for that?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"Jab Smith and Pierce Wesson," Jab told the hotel clerk. Pierce struggled, unsuccessfully, not to roll his eyes.

\* \* \* \* \*

"So just before you started feeling sick, you were doing what, exactly?"  
Pierce asked, trying to sound patient. Even Jab was starting to look as if the tedious self-absorbed *reality* of teenage girls was wiping the fantasy version from his mind.

"I was just standing around the, you know, the grotto."

"Were you, uh, in line to buy a kiss?"

"God, no." She made a face indicating this was the stupidest thing anybody in the history of the world had ever asked. "The grotto *sucks*. I mean, mistletoe, how lame is that? We were just making fun of it."

"And then," Pierce consulted his notes, "That's when you said you felt a little prick?" Jab snorted, and Pierce glared at him.

"A whole bunch of little pricks." Jab turned away, entirely losing the battle for control over his own facial expression. "They jabbed me in the neck. And that's just what happened to Kate, too, you can ask her. Except it got her in the arm. But there was this sharp pain, and then I felt really dizzy, so I went outside. And while I was sitting out there trying not to puke, this huge hairy white guy asked me to get in his truck. If you ask me," which Pierce hadn't, and had had no intention of, "it's some sort of kidnapping ring, and they're, like, drugging all the hot girls with syringes. I mean, none of the dweebs volunteering for the grotto have been attacked. What does that tell you?"

\* \* \* \* \*

"What *does* that tell us?" Pierce asked, once they'd politely dismissed the girl, who'd promptly grabbed two of her BFFs and headed for the mall washrooms for whatever it was girls did in groups in public washrooms. He and Jab were standing near the Mistletoe Grotto, at the edge of a crowd composed equally of people waiting in line and people standing in small clumps, mocking the grotto itself.

Jab shrugged. "That she over-estimates her own attractiveness?"

"That's not helpful. Look, do you think she's telling the truth? Was she drugged by a would-be kidnapper?"

"You're the one who said this was just an urban legend, dude," Jab reminded him, knowing even as he spoke that this was the part where Pierce would pull some complicated explanation out of thin air.

"Yeah, but listen," Pierce said, suddenly whipping out a laptop, "this is all happening around the Mistletoe Grotto, right? And there's a lot of mythology surrounding mistletoe."

"Which you're going to tell me about, whether I want to hear it or not."

Pierce ignored this. "For instance, Baldur was killed by being shot with mistletoe. Norse God," he explained, in response to Jab's blank look. "Thought he was immortal. Later he was resurrected, and his mother demanded that everyone celebrate by kissing whenever they passed under the mistletoe. Which is what our victims have in common--they weren't honoring the mistletoe tradition, they were mocking it."

"Could his mother, by any stretch of the imagination, be described as a big hairy white dude? Because otherwise I'm not seeing the connection."

"Maybe that's Baldur," Pierce said reasonably.

"Zombie Baldur is pissed at these girls because they aren't kissing under the mistletoe and proving they take his death seriously?" Jab considered this for a moment, then nodded. "Cool. I like it. So if you were an angry formerly-dead dude, what would your next move be?"

Simultaneously they turned to look in the direction of the mall washroom, where the latest not-quite-victim had disappeared. "Ah, crap," said Jab, in answer to his own question, and they started to run.

\* \* \* \* \*

The girl was sitting on the tile floor, wearing a gown and cape

completely unlike her own jeans and sweater--which were, Jab saw, neatly folded on the bathroom floor next to her. Some huge guy with shaggy shoulder-length hair and clothes made of leather and coarse wool, sort of like an escaped Viking cosplayer, was patiently cutting her hair while she sobbed and slumped dazedly against the wall. Her two friends--already shorn and redressed--were lying with their heads in her lap, completely unconscious.

As Pierce and Jab entered the already-crowded washroom, the kidnapper jumped to his feet with a roar, and pointed one hand at Pierce, who had uncharacteristically pushed his way ahead of Jab. A handful of white and green glittering, sparkling points spun toward them, dazzling them both. It was a bit like being in a snowglobe when someone had shaken it, except the swirling bits of sparkle were all headed directly at Pierce. Jab, standing behind him, was entirely blocked from the spray.

"Son of a bitch!" Jab exclaimed as Pierce slumped to the floor. Jab knelt tenderly behind him, and saw that there were a handful of tiny spears embedded in the smooth skin of Pierce's face. The hairy Viking guy turned threateningly, and Jab held up his hands in a conciliatory gesture. "Nothing personal, dude, just an expression. I don't even know your mother."

After an ominous pause the guy hoisted the two sleeping girls to his shoulders and left, not so much walking away as vanishing.

"Freaky," Jab said, and then struggled to sling Pierce over his shoulder. The girl on the floor had stopped crying and was watching him, wide-eyed. "Do you think you can walk? I've kind of got my hands full here." She nodded, and he pointed her back to the mall, where there were already policemen at the grotto. "Go tell them what happened, will you? My partner and I will, uh, catch up to you later on." He slipped past the washrooms and out the back entrance--no point in hanging around a crime scene looking suspicious.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Now it's time for you to research us up some more information," Jab said, caressing the wheel of the car. Pierce was already consulting their Journal of Convenient Stuff.

"They've probably been taken to the Hall of Frigg," Pierce said. He rolled his eyes at the smirk that spread across Jab's face in response. "It's the home of Frigga, the Norse goddess of marriage. She's Baldur's mother, after all, and responsible for the whole mistletoe thing."

The smirk was still there. "Marriage as in..." Jab prompted expectantly. Pierce sighed.

"It's not a euphemism. Marriage as in *marriage*. Vows, children, home and hearth? All that domestic stuff?"

Jab looked unconvinced. "Are you sure? Because that name really sounds like..."

"I'm sure. These girls are being taken from the mall and forced into a life of wedded bliss, fidelity, and domesticity."

Now Jab looked appalled. "That's horrible! We have to put a stop to this!" Sighing, Pierce buckled his seat belt.

"Do you even know where we're going?"

Jab pulled a crumpled brochure out of his pocket.

"Frigga's B&B offers Old-World Charm?" Pierce read, in tones of complete disbelief. "Are you kidding me?"

"I picked it up at the hotel." Jab squirmed, slightly uncomfortable. "I thought maybe she was running, you know, a...not really a B&B." Pierce looked momentarily blank, then revolted. "Hey, c'mon," Jab protested. "With a name like that, she's pretty much asking people to misinterpret her. Anyway, there's a map on the back."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Yes, the girls are here." Frigga had let them in without question; now they were seated in her overcrowded parlour, refusing cookies and hot drinks from a succession of young teenage girls. For kidnap victims, they looked strangely happy. Maybe they were employees. "They're happy here, you know. Their only punishment will be to make early marriages, and bear children. You'd be surprised how readily they embrace their fate, these days--I blame *Twilight*, personally. But it makes my job easier, and I do have to enforce the rules about mistletoe, after all."

"And you," Frigga went on, sounding more formal and Goddessy, "are, here in my household, subject to the same law." She pointed upwards, over their head. "Scorn to pay proper tribute to my son, and you will meet the same fate."

Pierce looked up. Sure enough, he and Jab were seated beneath a high ceiling spread with mistletoe. "The same fate? You mean...wives? Happy marriages, and children? Families of our own?" His eyes and voice were wistful.

Beside him, Jab shuddered. "Not a chance," he said decisively, and swept the younger man into his arms, tilting him backwards across his bulging lap before Pierce could do more than sputter weak objections, and silencing him with a punishing kiss.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What about the girls?" Pierce asked, after Jab had dragged him to the car.

"The girls?" Jab reversed carefully, then tore out of the parking lot in a cloud of dust.

"The teenage brides-to-be? The young women we were here to rescue?"

"Pierce," Jab said firmly, "some days, it's enough of a victory just to save yourself, you know? She said they'd be happy. She seemed like a nice enough lady, for a goddess. Hell, I believe her, okay? And I think the girls are in way less trouble than we'd have been if we stayed there any longer."

Pierce didn't answer, but for some reason the faintly wistful look was back on his face.

**Authorial fanon? Or additional canon.**

**This isn't a real update, in other words. Just a snippet.**

Thanks to [info]goldjadeocean for writing the warning.

Warning: while this contains no actual sex, there are indications that something sexual will happen immediately after it.

The library had been closed for hours, and most of its lights were out, when Nancy let herself inside and made her way upstairs. The keys to the library, to the archive, to Judy's office itself, were peculiarly exciting in themselves--mute proofs, each of them, that whatever spats went on by daylight Judy hadn't, wouldn't, maybe couldn't walk away from whatever this was they shared. More than friendship, certainly--less than commitment, but Nancy ruefully acknowledged, now as always, that she had only herself to blame for this.

Not for the first time she wondered what it would take, exactly, to demonstrate to Judy that all her much-vaunted freedom had, by now, no internal reality whatsoever: it was a myth, a game, a way to fill the time and the gap between now and the moment when she could admit she wasn't free at all and, even more, that she didn't want to be. Would Judy even believe her, after all this time and all these conquests? Shared mythologies have power, and their group had for so long now believed in Nancy the Heartless, Nancy the Conquerer, that the real Nancy, the one with the fully conquered heart, might seem an impossibility.

But a body, hot and hard and greedy: that they all knew she had, and that, thank the gods, Judy could never doubt, and seldom resist. Nancy grinned to herself, and unlocked the last lock.

Judy was sitting behind her desk, poised and impeccable as always. She raised one graceful eyebrow as Nancy entered the room. 'Changed your mind?'



she asked blandly.

‘Supposing I have,’ Nancy said, shutting the door. ‘What’s that worth? Ten of the best?’

‘Three,’ Judy countered, but she was smiling now, just a little, and Nancy saw the blood rising from her throat to flush her cheeks.

‘Seven,’ Nancy said, her voice husky even in her own ears, and Judy nodded, wordlessly opening the bottom drawer of her desk--and that was one key, Nancy realized with a rush of insight, that she hadn’t been given. Yet.

The leather riding crop was gorgeous in Judy’s slim, white hand. ‘The desk will support your weight,’ she reminded Nancy, her eyes shining oddly. ‘Bend over...’

**Micro background-canon/fanon thingy**

**This isn't a real update, in other words.**

Thanks to [info]jadegoldocean for writing this warning:

Warning: while this contains no actual sex, there are indications that something sexual will happen immediately after it.

They'd been working on Princely Plots for hours.

"I bet you never imagined you'd be turning to me for help." PrinceC almost managed to say that without smirking; perhaps if he'd tried, it would have been smirk-free. But it's difficult not to smirk when you're confident about how the conversation will go.

"Not particularly, no." Warr1or shrugged. He was standing behind PrinceC, not even close enough to read the screen over the younger man's shoulder. His hands were in his pockets; his space was inviolate, and he'd left distance between them deliberately. But now, sensing the slight challenge, he took one step forward. Still not close enough to touch, but close enough to loom. PrinceC didn't hear the step, didn't register the looming. "Why?"

Now PrinceC shrugged, one shoulder only, the movement carelessly beautiful under the silk of his Gryffindor pyjamas. "It's just that I know what you think of me, or at least, what your first impressions of me were."

"Really." It wasn't a question, just a desert-dry statement, irony laced with something that might have been anger. "That's quite a talent, mindreading."

Now PrinceC spun around, hearing something he couldn't quite identify. For the first time he looked puzzled, puzzled enough that he forgot to look cocky. That only lasted a second, though, and then the surety came back.

"You're not exactly hard to read," he teased. "You probably thought I was just another fanboi, revoltingly casual about gender and sexuality. Or possibly

you thought I was going to burn in hell for reading slash, or for shipping the wrong characters."

Warr1or's eyes darkened, but he answered calmly. "You forget how well known you are, then. I'd heard about you long before you ever spoke to me. I thought the same things everyone thinks, unless they're one of your fans."

PrinceC's smile faltered, but not a lot: he'd known, of course, that everyone with a large following inevitably attracts a few anti-fans. Still, he stood up before he answered, some instinct warning him that this entirely pleasant banter was turning somehow confrontational.

"And what, exactly, is that? What did you think?"

Warr1or stepped closer still. "Too caught up in your own popularity to question yourself. Careful to play it right down the line: just scornful enough of your fans to look cool, but not scornful enough to really risk their adulation."

PrinceC blinked. "Where the hell is this coming from?"

Warr1or wasn't done. "Cautious about weighing in on anything really controversial; diligent about weighing in on the things fandom likes to think are controversial, like sexuality, but only to give the already agreed-upon answers. But you give the answers quicker than anyone else, louder, in just the right words--so you always look like the magic boy, golden, bright, ahead of the curve. And no one has ever said anything different, to your face. It's only behind your back they call you a squib in Gryff pyjamas."

"I thought you were going to call me corrupt. Or unmanly." He gamely aimed for a light tone, but his voice shook, spoiling the effort.

"Oh, no: not that. Never that." The tension between them was almost audible, like steel screaming. Warr1or took the last step, and then there was no space left between them, only the warmth of Warr1or's body, as improbably hard and male and fantasy-worthy as one of his stupidly stereotyped fic characters. PrinceC shivered, unable to look away.

### **The Dreams of Angels (Chapter Three)**

Title: The Dreams of Angels

Chapter: Three

Author: Warr1or

Pairing: PrincessB/Jab. Sammich forever!

Dedication: For all my fellow sammiches: may the purity of PB/J illuminate your lives as it has my own.

The next day PrincessB rose from her midday prayers in the castle's rose-scented chapel, and made her way to the courtyard where she knew she would find her cousin Pierce. Yesterday at their humble evening meal he had most kindly reassured her that their bulging stockpile of goods had grown to meet Jab's requirements. When she had pressed him to tell her to what manly task they would next turn their energies, he had been unable to resist her innocent enthusiasm. Too, her willing acceptance of the plain fare on which he and Jab had dined had impressed upon Pierce an obvious truth: PrincessB had allied herself with them, and fancied herself part of a trio. It could never be, of course. She was a delicate girl-child, not a warrior. By every standard, she was unequal to Pierce and Jab. They were stronger and more skilled and, although she was the princess royal of the de St. Aubyns, Pierce was conscious that Jab possessed--and that he himself had begun to acquire--a nobility of soul that, refined by trial and struggle, would be worth more than mere lineage could ever supply.

Still, PrincessB was a loyal supporter, and she was doing her best to fall in line with Jab's requirements. And, Pierce well knew, she prayed for them, sweetly and diligently, without ceasing. She deserved to accompany them, as long as in so doing she was not placed in harm's way either physically or morally. So Pierce had suggested that she might, if she so wished, witness their

early afternoon training session.

She had never, PrincessB quickly realized, seen anything like this before. Few if any maidens had. Pierce and Jab, stripped of superfluous clothes and glistening with sweat, were engaged in fierce exercise--all part, the princess realized, of their training. Her heart beat faster at the sight of their exertions, and she trembled with sympathetic excitement.

For what felt like an eternity, the courtyard was silent except for the rough panting of the two men, their occasional grunts of effort, and the princess' own gasps of excitement. They wrestled near-silently, muscles throbbing, hands gripping and sliding along slick, sweat-soaked flesh. PrincessB clasped her own hands together so tightly her knuckles were white, and felt weak with innocent girlish enthusiasm.

And then the sacred near silence of the two godlike men was rudely and abruptly broken by a chorus of frivolous laughter and silly jokes as a group of finely dressed young noblemen burst into the courtyard. PrincessB shrank shyly into the shadows. She recognized these men. They were the peers of her cousin Pierce, the wealthy heirs of half a dozen noble houses, and had stayed at the castle before this. She had always found them both annoying and intimidating. Their jokes were shallow and inane, and their boisterous behavior and overindulgent lifestyle were worthless at best, and dangerous at worst. Now, however, she found that even the sight of their costly garments and the sound of their upperclass accents repelled her. She had, unknowingly, learned to so admire the worthy Jab that anything different from his honest speech and homespun clothes was, in her eyes, less. I bet this is how Pierce feels, she thought.

But whatever Pierce felt within his heart and soul, his actions now fell short. Jab had only just pinned him to the ground, holding him firmly in place for one long lingering moment to prove his victory. Pierce had wriggled and writhed in vain, unable to free himself. Now he opened his eyes in horror at the

voices of his friends, and blushed crimson at being discovered in such a position.

Jab, expressionless, watched his face carefully and understood. However disappointed he might have been at Pierce's reaction to being seen, Jab did not react other than by relinquishing Pierce and getting to his feet. Jab bowed once and left the courtyard without a word or a backwards glance. Pierce felt both relieved to be able to straighten up and act as if nothing had happened, and queerly disappointed that Jab had walked away.

He leaped to his feet and tried to cover his discomfiture by greeting his wealthy friends loudly and jovially. They seemed not to have noticed anything peculiar in his choosing to exercise with Jab. Probably, he realized with relief, they all took similar exercise, and certainly they had no way of knowing Jab was anything more than a personal trainer, so there was no reason to be embarrassed by his friendship. "That your manservant?" drawled one of them now in an affected accent. "Skillful brute. I wouldn't mind taking a few pointers from him m'self."

"He doesn't give lessons to anyone but me," Pierce said quickly.

"Aha, trying to keep an edge, are you?" said another of his friends, punching him cheerfully in the arm. "Good plan. Don't give away all your secrets, eh? You might want to go a few rounds with one of us, after all."

Chattering loudly and pointlessly the group left the courtyard in search of strong drink and comfortable chairs. PrincessB waited until she was sure they were shut away in her cousin's study, and then entered the castle herself.

She found her father standing in front of one of the windows, smiling in a self-satisfied manner. "Sire," she said meekly, "how came these louts and ruffians to the castle? I thought perhaps Pierce had outgrown their company of late, and learned to set himself higher standards."

"I invited them," her father said carelessly. "I thought it would do Pierce good to spend some time among his own kind, so I sent for his friends." PrincessB fled to the safety of her rooms feeling appalled and anguished, locked

the door, and burst into overwrought tears.